

How should geneticists talk about science to non-scientist friends?

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As a geneticist, when I get asked by a friend or neighbor to explain what I do for a living more than just being a biologist, I might say something like: “I work on understanding how proteins function using yeast and other model organisms.” My companion’s expression often betrays the questions: “With all your years of being a scientist, why aren’t you doing something useful? How come you’re not finding new drugs active against cancer cells? The worst possible interaction might be our own look of incomprehension that someone could be so clueless about science.

But such a reaction is not helpful to the cause of keeping research funding a priority, as we rely on the support of citizens for a share of tax dollars. But if it’s impossible to convey the intricacies of biology in a few moments of conversation, what should we attempt to get across when we talk to non-scientists? At the least, we should try to transmit the idea that for a disease like cancer, better treatments come about only when biologists better understand processes like how genes suffer mutations and how cells divide – and that we gain most of this knowledge from studying simple organisms.

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