

Interview

VOL.15

Elizabeth H. Blackburn and John W. Sedat

Elizabeth H. Blackburn, Ph.D.

《Profile》

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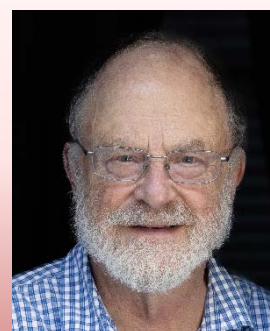
2009 Nobel Laureate in Physiology or Medicine



John W. Sedat, Ph.D.

《Profile》

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2026 年 3 月 24 日、WLB 支援センターみやこ創設 15 周年記念「ノーベル生理学・医学賞受賞者 講演会」として、ブラックバーン博士・セダット博士ご夫妻に研究とワークライフバランスについてご講演いただきました。ご講演に引き続き、3 月 28 日に、ご夫妻にインタビューをお願いしました。

講演会の座長を務めていただいた糸井恵先生・糸井啓純先生（ともに明治国際医療大学）、本学からは八代生体機能形態化学教授、藤原泌尿器外科学講師、センターメンバーに加え、医学科の学生 5 名がお話を伺いました。 ※役職名等はインタビュー当時

Q1: What advice would you give for promoting gender equality in Japan, viewed from the United States?

Professor Blackburn (hereinafter "Professor B")

I believe institutions must actively encourage both men and women in research. However, women face unique family pressures as primary caregivers for children and elderly parents. While a PhD is tough, sustaining a long-term career is harder. Institutions

must respect our boundaries; for instance, my husband and I always made it a rule to be home for dinner with our son.

Beyond personal discipline, institutional support is a deciding factor. We need a safety net for 'crisis' moments, like when a child is sick or childcare falls through. Whether through emergency care facilities or financial assistance for backup babysitters—similar to the support provided by Princeton University—these investments make a research career possible. If institutions genuinely understand and support a woman's complex timetable, it becomes much easier for us to commit.

Professor Sedat (hereinafter " Professor S ")

Times are changing, and countries like France show us what's possible with women now leading departments in prestigious universities. However, the U.S. and other regions still have significant work to do.

One critical area for change is within our national academies, which have historically resembled a 'men's club.' In mathematics, membership has been 99% male, which is unacceptable. Fortunately, special committees are now working to ensure brilliant women are finally recognized, because there is nothing inherently superior about the male mind.

The second point concerns domestic life: men need to step up and become equal partners. Housework, cooking, and childcare should not fall solely on women. From an anatomical perspective, working with your hands is vital for brain health, and engaging in these domestic tasks is actually beneficial to one's mental state. When the culture at home shifts, it creates a much healthier environment for everyone to thrive.

Q2: Do you think a system allowing researcher couples to work at the same institution is important for balancing childcare and research?

Professor B

I feel strongly about the importance of systems that allow couples to work at the same institution. There is an old-fashioned prejudice that having a spouse in the same department leads to 'favoritism,' but as long as each individual is hired because they are independently excellent, there is no issue.

Speaking from personal experience, John and I are both full-time scientists in the same department at UCSF, and it has worked wonderfully. A key factor has been maintaining research independence—our specific research areas remain distinct.

Whether a couple works in the same department or different ones, being at the same

institution provides incredible stability. The idea that there is always one 'strong' and one 'weak' partner is outdated; today, many couples consist of two equally talented individuals who are equally deserving of their positions.

To achieve gender equality, institutions must address the 'automatic habit' of men recommending other men for awards and fellowships. This is often an unconscious reflex born of legacy networks where men naturally think of those they are most familiar with.

I saw this firsthand with the Physician-Scientist Program at UCSF, which provides early-career funding. When I joined the selection committee, every single nominee was male because the male department chairs weren't looking beyond their immediate circles.

To break this cycle, I took a firm stand and threatened to step down if we continued to see only male nominees. By simply requiring chairs to consider both men and women, the candidate pool grew significantly, and the quality remained just as high. We discovered brilliant women who had been overlooked simply because they weren't part of traditional networks, proving that broadening the search does not lower standards.

Ultimately, investing financial resources to ensure women have research time and funding protects the university's future. Failing to do so means discarding 50% of available talent. We must challenge old habits through intentional nomination and mentorship to build a truly inclusive community.

Professor S

While gender equality is a major focus, we must also address age diversity within our most prestigious institutions. In recent National Academy elections, it struck me as crazy that almost everyone proposed was 65 or 70 years old. These organizations provide vital advice to the government, yet the selection process relies so heavily on past achievements that it exclusively favors those at the end of their careers.

We need to actively bring in younger people, even at the assistant professor level. You can recognize brilliance from a researcher's very first papers, even without a long CV. Science needs their fresh ideas, expertise, and energy. While I am speaking against my own demographic, the younger generation often has the best insights; as we get older, we simply don't have the same drive.

This shift is also vital for education. Medical students need to see that young researchers are driving the future to experience the excitement and innovation ahead. In research, medicine, and policy, we must value new perspectives just as much as years of experience. Age diversity is essential for a healthy scientific community.

Professor B

Like many elite organizations, the National Academy of Medicine's election process was once driven by a cycle of men nominating other men—simply because it was what they knew. But I'm happy to report that this is shifting, as institutions are now much more proactive in guiding and supporting the nomination process.

At the same time, I recognize that for the younger generation in the room, the primary concern isn't necessarily joining an academy; it's the fundamental challenge of building and sustaining a career.

Q3: How can UCSF fund the rise of sufficient money to support the women researchers.?

Professor B

We have been fortunate in California to benefit from significant philanthropy—from individuals, foundations, and corporations, alongside federal NIH grants. It is important to understand that this funding is often earmarked for specific programs.

While budgets are always a challenge, even a modest amount of support can be transformative. It doesn't have to cover a full salary; simply providing enough to give an assistant professor or a fellow the time and resources to conduct research can be the stepping stone they need to successfully apply for larger national grants later on.

Professor S

My advice to you is to never be afraid to seek out these resources yourself. There are many organizations, like the Gates Foundation, that are very open to suggestions.

You can simply write a letter with a proposal; they might say no, but sometimes they'll listen. Over the years, I've learned that you can just pick up the phone. Whether it's your professor or a CEO, people will listen to a good idea. In my experience, even when interacting with international colleagues, such as those in Japan, there is a genuine willingness to listen and engage.

Q4: Can you tell us the current ratio of the women's principal investigators and the men's principal investigators in the UCSF?

Professor B

I can't provide exact statistics, but I can speak to the reality we face. On paper, the

situation might look promising because you see many female researchers in clinical departments acting as principal investigators on major grants. However, if you look closer at the actual structure, a different story emerges.

Many of these women do not hold tenured positions, and at the highest levels of leadership—such as department chairs—the number of women remains incredibly low. It is often the case that an institution's public face showcases women to suggest progress, while they are frequently missing from positions of permanent security and real authority.

We must be careful not to be misled by surface-level appearances. True gender equity isn't just about having women in the building; it's about ensuring they have the same tenured stability and leadership opportunities as their male colleagues.

Miyako

The situation is similar in Japan. Our university is a public one, where the positions are permanent. But in private medical schools, the structure is different; they use tenure tracks or temporary contracts. It is often the case that many women find themselves in these non-permanent positions.

Professor B

We must be vigilant in ensuring our applicant pools include enough women—an area where institutions should be much more proactive.

When I was a department chair at UCSF in the 1990s, I was the only woman in such a role within the School of Medicine. Although my male colleagues were very pleasant, the lack of representation was stark, especially compared to the Schools of Pharmacy and Nursing, which already had women in leadership.

We cannot wait for change; we must look at our leadership structures and ask where the opportunities for women are. If women are missing, we must step in to ensure they are nominated and encouraged. It's about making a deliberate, active effort to bring women into the rooms where decisions are made.

Q5: I'm struggling to balance family happiness with my career. What do you think is the most important factor in sustaining a demanding profession like yours while keeping a fulfilling personal life?

Professor B

I can speak from our own experience about how we managed our household while building our careers. We were fortunate to have a wonderful, trusted woman come to our house five days a week to look after our son in the afternoons, which was essential since we couldn't leave our work in the middle of the day. She also helped with housework and cooking, allowing us to focus entirely on our research and our family.

Some worry that having outside childcare is negative, but that is why we made it a strict rule to always be home for dinner on weeknights. Having this help eliminated common domestic stresses; we never had to argue about dishes, laundry, or cleaning.

We viewed this as a vital investment. We paid her well and respected her deeply. If you have two salaries, it is absolutely worthwhile to invest in a reliable person to handle daily tasks, as it preserves your energy for your work and your time together as a family.

Miyako

Thank you.

While the number of female growers is increasing now, I think one very important point for keeping my profession is how I view myself. I often tell myself that I have to cook for my family because I am the mother. Even though I can ask my mother to cook for them instead, I still feel that I should do it myself because of my role.

Professor B

I was very fortunate to have my own mother as a role model. She was a doctor with seven children, and because she had help around the house, she taught me a freeing lesson: the house does not have to be perfect every day. By learning to be a 'bad' housekeeper, I could focus my energy on my family and my work rather than on domestic perfection. Now that I am retired, I enjoy tidying up, but during my career, I had to be clear about my priorities.

Many working mothers feel guilt when comparing themselves to stay-at-home mothers who spend hours baking elaborate cakes for school events. I remember my sister, a hematologist, staying up until two in the morning because her homemade cakes weren't 'good enough,' and I decided right then I would never do that to myself. My secret weapon was finding shortcuts that made the children happy without costing me my sleep or my sanity.

In the U.S., my 'secret weapon' was frozen Bagel Bites; I could pop them in the oven for a few minutes, and the children loved them. I'm sure there is a Japanese equivalent—something simple and quick that the kids enjoy. While it can be fun to bake beautiful

cookies on a holiday, you don't need to do it every day. Your children will be perfectly happy, and you will have the mental space to succeed in your career and truly enjoy your time with them.

Q6: You've mentioned the importance of both partners having their own careers. But what happens if one person gets a great job opportunity abroad—like in the U.S.—and the other doesn't? This often leads to one moving while the other stays in Japan. How do you think couples should balance these kinds of conflicting career opportunities? (A medical student)

Professor B

"When one partner receives a prestigious offer abroad, it becomes a matter of negotiation—both with each other and with the hiring institution. For example, you might agree that one person takes the lead for a few years, with the understanding that the next move will prioritize the other's career. More importantly, you must be brave enough to ask the institution for help. It is perfectly acceptable to ask them to find an opportunity for your spouse; this isn't a 'favor,' but a way to ensure valuable training isn't wasted. Many U.S. institutions understand that supporting dual careers is essential to recruit top talent.

Regarding our own work, John and I found that maintaining professional independence was incredibly helpful. Historically, if a couple worked together, the man received all the credit while the woman's contributions were overlooked. By having separate research areas, we were recognized for our individual merits. We constantly talk and give advice, but having that independent space is mentally healthy.

My biggest piece of advice is to never be afraid to advocate for your partner's career as part of your own; it is never wrong to ask for what you need to make your family life and research work together.

Professor S

When you are trying to find opportunities for both partners, it is essential to be adventurous and look beyond the traditional university setting. In both the United States and Japan, superb research is happening outside of academia. Companies like Genentech do incredible work, and working for a biotech company can be much easier. In a university, researchers often spend half their time writing grant applications,

whereas in a company, the funding is already there, allowing you to focus entirely on the science.

So, if one of you secures a university position, the situation is not hopeless for the other. Look at government-run national laboratories or explore opportunities in the private sector. Since these roles aren't always advertised, you must be proactive: ask your network about openings, or approach a company directly to see if they need your specific expertise. It takes effort and networking, but there are many paths to a successful research career. It is never a case of 'one academic position or nothing'; you just have to be willing to look at the entire scientific landscape.

Q7: Women often have excellent organizational skills and perform very well academically, yet few hold high-level leadership positions. Do you see this changing anytime soon? And for Dr. Sedat, how can men catch up to women in terms of these personal and management skills? (A medical student)

Professor B

"True leadership needs to be redefined from an isolated, dictatorial 'boss' model to a collaborative, team-oriented approach. Although society claims progress, the number of women in leadership has stagnated because we continue to value the wrong traits. Success in any organization comes from collective effort—a concept deeply embedded in Japanese culture—and data shows women lead very successfully due to this team-oriented mindset.

While visibility as a female Nobel laureate is crucial for inspiring young scientists, many women currently reject high-level positions because the systemic sacrifices required aren't worth it. Society must shift its focus from individual power to the strength of the team.

Q8: When balancing a family and a career, much of the focus is placed on a partner's support or finding great childcare. Still, women must often pause their careers for childbirth. How can we better safeguard a woman's career path during this period? Given how closely this is tied to Japan's critical issue of a declining birth rate, do you see any potential solutions? (A medical student)

Professor B

When I look for a successful model for women in leadership, I look to Scandinavia, where the state recognizes that robust childcare and protected parental leave are vital investments. For instance, our research on the chronic stress of mothers caring for children with disabilities showed immense strain in the U.S., where the burden falls on the individual. In Scandinavia, the state funds professional help, understanding that supporting a family is a logical investment in human capital.

Society invests years in your education, and most of us will work for 40 years. Early childhood is a very small fraction of that career span. If an institution or country provides support during those few intense years, they gain decades of highly productive work in return. I returned to work just six weeks after my son was born, but that was only possible because my husband, John, and I were proactive and hired a babysitter we trusted completely.

My advice to young families is to be proactive and seek help in any form. John and I also made it a rule never to travel for work at the same time, or we simply brought our son along. While these personal arrangements are vital, I truly hope nations like Japan will look to Scandinavia and treat childcare as a crucial national investment, ensuring we don't lose the incredible talent women bring to the workforce over their careers.

Thank you very much.

