

By Brandon Brown and Annie Lu Nguyen

In case of death

It started with an attempt at humor during a team meeting in April. Brandon, the principal investigator (PI), expressed gratitude for the work of a team member, Chris, then bemoaned the big shoes that would be left to fill if Chris was hit by a bus. Not long before, a friend and colleague had died suddenly, and we had seen the people who worked most closely with him worry and wonder, in the midst of their grief, who would continue the research, advise the graduate students, track down the data files, and lead the national coordinating center. We had both taken steps toward personal end-of-life planning since the onset of the pandemic, and we realized it could be relevant to our work lives, too. But it wasn't until our team meeting that the reality really hit home. "As the PI, I have details and documents no one else has access to," Brandon realized. "What happens if I get hit by a bus?"

After that team meeting, we sprang into action. Annie, a co-investigator on the project who studies end-of-life planning, looked into the literature for best practices to plan for a PI's sudden death—and came up empty. So we had to develop our own plans. Brandon made sure all the study documents, including the grant application, institutional review board protocols, contracts, and budgets, were backed up and stored in a way that is secure but accessible in case of his absence. He asked the financial administrators at his university and the grantor about what happens to the funding if he dies. His inquiries often yielded more questions than answers, as the administrators had not thought much about this question before, but we hoped to set the stage for some resolution down the line. Brandon even mapped out the percent effort paid to each team member on the project and how his own payment would be distributed in his absence.

At some points, wrangling these details was frustrating and almost felt like a waste of time to Brandon, when he could have been working on something more immediately "productive" related to his scholarly work—especially given that he is a midcareer PI and hopefully far from death. But he reminded himself it is important and worthwhile to lay this groundwork to help his colleagues should the unexpected happen.

Finally, we had to address perhaps the most important question: Who would lead the study in Brandon's absence? This would be a significant request, almost an academic marriage proposal. Still, Brandon approached it with a bit of levity, sending his request to Annie in an email headed



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ing agreements, and research ethics applications, under the title "proxy PI in case of PI death or incapacitation." Other questions include, what is your biggest wish or vision for this project? On papers published postmortem, do you want to be included as an author or acknowledged? Where should the royalties due to you from a project or discovery be directed?

Contemplating and talking about our own deaths can be uncomfortable. But by planning ahead, we find peace in knowing that we are doing our best to help our life's work continue beyond our physical presence. ■

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