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Geologist Stephanie Zihms, who has multiple sclerosis, urges researchers to keep copies of all their medical records, especially if moving internationally.

HEALTH

Science and sickness

How to cope with a chronic condition while pursuing a research career.

BY EMILY SOHN

Jennifer Mankoff was a mid-career researcher in 2006 when she started to experience extreme fatigue. Her condition worsened during the following year with frequent flu-like attacks, a frozen jaw, hearing loss, memory trouble and problems with fine motor control.

In 2007, Mankoff was diagnosed with Lyme disease — a tick-borne illness that can be difficult to manage, thanks to disagreements in the medical community about how to test for, diagnose and treat it. She struggled to find medical solutions, but continued to publish, teach and win grants and tenure. But it took her a while to come to terms with her physical limitations.

“My image of who I could or should be didn’t match up with reality in terms of my productivity,” she says. “I would go back and forth between frustration and pride over what I had accomplished.” Today, as an endowed professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, she studies human–computer interactions and accessible technology for those with chronic illnesses or disabilities.

Mankoff is one of many scientists worldwide who face emotional and practical challenges in their work as a result of long-lasting or recurrent medical conditions. Working as a scientist can be physically and mentally demanding, in the laboratory and in the field. It can be even harder for those with physical limitations, who might need extra rest or days off work.

Researchers who are chronically but not

terminally ill might also fear bias and stigma (see ‘Know your rights’ for a summary of protections available under the law) if they leave work early or ask for extra help. This is particularly true if they have an illness that’s ‘invisible’ to others, such as arthritis or diabetes.

Selective disclosure about a condition can help to foster understanding, and an acceptance of the need to accommodate physical fatigue or weakness, or additional time away from the lab, say some who have chronic maladies. They add that it can also be useful to focus on crucial tasks — such as completing a manuscript — when energy levels are highest. Ultimately, say scientists with long-standing medical conditions, perseverance is essential to success. Sticking with a research programme also signals to superiors and colleagues, ►