

Vivian Weil's Commentary on "Collaboration and Credit"

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Collaboration and Credit

In a large medical institution, the Schrag Center for Breast Cancer Research provides clinicians and basic scientists from different research groups and departments with a forum for weekly scientific discussions. These meetings offer promise of cross-fertilization of ideas and formation of collaborative relationships linking basic research and clinical practice. The conflict that arises in this case demonstrates that for such enterprises to be productive it is necessary to establish policies or ground rules governing such matters as control and use of data. That is to say, that a forum of the kind the Schrag Center offers requires conventions similar to those of individual research groups.

Dr. Robert Kent, director of the Schrag Center and a highly regarded investigator and clinician in the field of breast cancer, facilitates scientific discussions at the regular weekly meetings, which he apparently has instituted. It is to his credit that he has arranged for this kind of regular communication among representatives of a diverse collection of research and clinical groups. However, Dr. Kent's control of Center funding, which many of the investigators receive, and his position as host and facilitator of the weekly discussions make him an especially powerful figure in this scene. Although all of the investigators who attend the meetings and all the groups they represent have their own sources of funding, the weekly meetings require policies or structure that furnish some checks on Kent's exercise of power. In the absence of ground rules, Kent is in a position to proceed according to his own lights.

Kent himself should have recognized the need for policies or ground rules for the weekly exchanges and for the use of ideas and data that might be generated. If he had gone beyond arranging meetings and had established appropriate ground rules, Kent would have shown himself to be a better leader. He should have drafted a set of ground rules for the discussions and their sequels and revised them as necessary to gain the agreement of the leaders of the groups represented.

Other group and department heads also should have recognized a responsibility to devise explicit policies and to keep a close eye on developments at the meetings. They share responsibility for the failure to set out the "rules of the game" and are also answerable for conflicts that arise due to the absence of policies. Since there seem to be no explicit rules, it is especially necessary for research group leaders to keep informed about the meetings and the use of ideas generated. An untenured assistant professor who sends her graduate student to a meeting with new data should be especially vigilant.

Dr. Barry should have kept in closer touch with John, her student; that is part of her responsibility to her student. She had an interest in feedback, as well. It seems that she let a few weeks pass without communicating with her student or other attendees about how his data were received. However, her student has a responsibility to keep in touch with her; graduate students should not be passive. Since Kent and others were clearly interested in his data, John was remiss in not reporting promptly to Dr. Barry, if only in the interest of speeding up his work.

Notwithstanding the failures of others to carry out their responsibilities, Kent's conduct is objectionable for violating standards of courtesy, morality and professional ethics. First, as a matter of courtesy, he should have discussed with Dr. Barry his interest in propagating her student's findings. It would be reasonable for her to expect such courtesy. Second, although he may have been unfamiliar with the specific environment and conventions of graduate training in "basic" scientific research, Kent should have had a sense that people from other areas of research have significant investments in their work. He should have recognized that his position of power did not license him to pursue his goals heedless of others' interests. His duty to consult with Dr. Barry before disseminating her student's data is a matter of morality: respect for the interests of others. In proceeding without due regard for others' interests, Kent has done injury to a graduate student. Third, insofar as he represented the data as his own without credit to Dr. Barry and the

student, he is also guilty of misrepresentation and misappropriation of data. He failed to meet professional standards in not having taken the lead to ensure that clear guidelines governed the weekly exchanges and follow-up.

Kent's conduct is objectionable in another respect. Dr. Barry learned from Jim, an old friend and colleague who heard Dr. Kent's presentation, that Kent reported three sets of experimental replicates, two more than her student had obtained. The discrepancy might be due to carelessness and error. Perhaps Kent or his group, extended the experimental work and obtained more data. It may be that Kent lied or fabricated data. If Kent did not actually derive two additional sets of experimental replicates, he violated moral and professional standards in propagating a report that was either erroneous or based on falsified or fabricated data. If he actually obtained additional data, he violated a professional duty to inform Dr. Barry and John. It is more likely that he made a careless error or reported untruthfully. In either case, he violated both standards of our common morality and professional standards. If Kent had acted with courtesy and respect for others' interests, he would have consulted with Dr. Barry about presenting the data. Taking that step should have ensured that he made no error with respect to the data. If he fabricated data or lied about the number of sets of replicates, he is guilty of scientific misconduct. Whether he made a careless error or knowingly misled his audience, his conduct was damaging to the scientific enterprise. The conventions for conducting and reporting research make trust pivotal. When investigators do not take care to report accurately and truthfully, they undermine trust and cause those who rely on their word to take actions they might otherwise not have reason to take. In this case, some drug companies may have been misled.

For at least two reasons, Dr. Barry has no choice but to deal with this situation promptly. One reason is that her student has been injured, and the other is that the drug companies are interested in the data Dr. Kent has reported. She is obligated to do what she can to reduce the harm to John. Any connection with a company based on carelessly reported, falsified or fabricated data could have serious consequences for all the parties. In dealing with this predicament, Dr. Barry should try to have a less emotional conversation with Dr. Kent about all the ramifications of this situation. If Kent did falsify or fabricate data, they may be able to work out a plan that will mitigate the damage and put this work on a track that satisfies all the interests involved. It will also be necessary to talk to other members of the Schrag Center discussion group. They, too, have stakes in resolving this conflict and in

devising appropriate ground rules for continuing the weekly discussions.

The order in which Dr. Barry should undertake these conversations depends on the local circumstances. Is Dr. Kent willing to talk further? How accessible are other heads of research groups? Whether Dr. Barry needs to approach her department chairperson depends on the outcome of the conversations with others represented in the weekly discussions and of her discussion with Dr. Kent. Resolving the conflict among the parties who are involved in a way that satisfies the interests of Dr. Barry and John and generates appropriate ground rules would be the most desirable outcome. However, if Dr. Barry cannot manage to bring that about, she must disclose the situation to her chairperson. She has a duty to inform the chairperson if there are reasons to think that Dr. Kent presented falsified or fabricated data at the international meeting. In that event, the chairperson should have institutional policies and procedures to use for guidance with respect to the next steps to take.