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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Reviewer Confidentiality vs. Mentor Responsibilities: A Conflict of Obligations

Year

1999

Description

This case discusses the problems scientist face mentoring students, maintaining reviewer confidentiality, workplace and student-mentor relationships.

Body

Dr. Ethicos, a highly renowned molecular biologist, is working at an elite academic institution and is one of a select few scientists in a hot new field - studying a novel protein called *survivin*. The good doctor receives a paper to review for the prestigious *Journal of Way Cool Proteins*. The paper, from the lab of Dr. Spacely, suggests a novel interaction between two proteins, *survivin* and *GFX*, claiming that the presence of both proteins is necessary for the full survival-promoting function of *survivin*. However, the paper is fraught with problems. Controls are done poorly or not at all; data presented in one figure are inconsistent with data shown in another figure; alternative interpretations fail to be considered; and claims are overstated.

Dr. Ethicos groans at such a waste of paper but gives the paper a detailed critique recommending significant revisions. It will take a significant amount of time to repeat the experiments and perform the necessary controls Dr. Ethicos has suggested. The paper probably will not make it into press for at least six months

and perhaps significantly longer than that. Dr. Ethicos is satisfied with the critique and sends it off.

Over the next few weeks, a possible interaction between the two proteins sticks in her mind. A graduate student in her lab, Sarah Tonin, has been attempting to develop a culture system (using primary neurons) in which to analyze the survival-promoting effects of *survivin*. She has been having trouble getting the cells to live long enough to analyze the effects of the protein. It is possible that *GFX* might keep the cells alive long enough for Sarah to examine the effects of *survivin*.

Discussion Questions

1. Should Dr. Ethicos have refused to review this paper? Why or why not?
2. Should Dr. Ethicos suggest that Sarah try adding *GFX* to the cells?
3. How long should Dr. Ethicos be required to wait before mentioning this experiment to Sarah?
4. Would your answer to Questions 2 and 3 be different if Sarah came to Dr. Ethicos frustrated, dejected and ready to give up the project?
5. If you were Dr. Ethicos, would your course of action differ if another professor independently mentioned a rumor that there might be an interaction between the two proteins?
6. Are there other alternatives to either breaking confidentiality or watching your student waste time, energy and resources?

Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., *Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries*, Volume 3, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 1999.

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Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario
Hypothetical / Fictional Case

Parent Collection

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Topics

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