

Michael Pritchard's Commentary on "The Chance Meeting"

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At the outset it is important to bear in mind a distinction between ideals we might believe research scientists should strive for and the actual context in which they currently conduct their research. I do not know what the overall importance the SMEL virus in this case study might have for public health, safety and welfare. From the standpoint of ideal scientific research, the greater its import for public health, safety and welfare, the stronger the argument for widespread cooperative research and the weaker the argument for keeping research findings secret.

"The Chance Meeting" describes two competitive research labs, both of which are at least partly staffed by graduate students under the supervision of senior researchers. In fact, the two labs are described as "Dr. John Smith's" and "Dr. Shirley Frank's," suggesting research settings in which proprietary claims are made in regard to research results. One might wish for a less competitive, less proprietary research setting, but that is an ideal rather than the reality of this case. My commentary will focus on the ethical problems inherent in the competitive research setting described.

Dr. Smith has set the tone for the viral conference to be held at a nearby university; since many "competitors" will be attending, nothing is to be said about the results generated in his lab. This rule seems severe even in a competitive setting. After all, this is a conference, where, presumably, some information is to be shared. Furthermore, Smith's lab has already learned some results from Frank's lab (i.e., that SMEL protease may be able to cleave protein X). Nevertheless, Smith has instructed everyone to say nothing about their lab results.

What could be said in defense of Dr. Smith's stance? One possibility is that the lab results are not well developed or secure enough to be shared. Another is that, as head of the lab, Dr. Smith believes that he should report all lab results. His rule might be an attempt to control the information coming from his lab. Finally, it is

relevant to consider the sources of the funding for Dr. Smith's lab. He may have special responsibilities to the funding agencies, especially if they are private agencies.

However, Smith's basic attitude could be simply competitive and proprietary, quite apart from any special obligations to funding agencies.. As head of the lab, Smith may feel a responsibility to keep the lab "afloat" - even more, to be "Number 1." Presumably, considerable money, time and work have been invested in the lab's research. "We cannot afford to be too charitable," Smith might urge. "Others should not be allowed free access to what we've discovered through hard work." Of course, other participants at the conference might reason similarly, raising the question of why a conference is being held at all. Denial of free access is not the same as complete denial of access. Still, Dr. Smith may be insisting on reciprocal exchanges of information, and, as head of the lab, he may have been telling researchers in his lab that they should not be sharing lab results without first obtaining his approval.

To Lisa's credit, she did go to Dr. Smith to ask if she could share their tentative findings about strain B with her old high school friend. Why did he refuse? It could be that, so far, only "preliminary data" have issued from Lisa's work; such results should not be released prematurely, Dr. Smith might have thought. It could be that Dr. Smith did not see Lisa's sharing as a reciprocal exchange. Admittedly, Steve Jones had told her enough about his somewhat similar research that she realized he was using strain A (without success) rather than strain B. However, that was not useful information, since Lisa already knew that strain A was not successful. Dr. Smith might ask, "What's the mutual gain here? None. So why should we help another lab move ahead in this competitive environment? Would they do that for us?"

Lisa might still think that Dr. Smith is being unreasonable. But her only apparent motive for suggesting strain B to Steve Jones is that Lisa and Steve were old friends in high school, although they haven't seen each other since. Giving an old friend from high school a break might seem like a good thing to do, but Lisa's action may well harm her lab (if it falls behind competitively) as well as damaging her relationships of trust with Dr. Smith and other members of the lab. She has not claimed that this information should be shared for the overall good of society (advancing our common store of knowledge in fighting disease, e.g.). It seems more a matter of pleasing an old friend. If Lisa wants to share information with Steve in order to support higher scientific ideals, then she should advance this argument to

Dr. Smith and her lab associates. However, that does not seem to be her driving concern. I conclude that she made a wise, and morally defensible, decision in refusing to share her results with Steve.

A further question is whether fear of retribution (from Dr. Smith) is a good reason for Lisa not to share her results with Steve. It probably is a realistic fear. If Lisa is motivated only by fear of retribution, that suggests a failure to see the morally valid reasons for not sharing her results with Steve.

If fear of retribution is the main reason Lisa and her colleagues do not share their lab results with others, that suggests that the lab atmosphere is not what it should be. Perhaps Dr. Smith should have open discussions of how their findings should be handled and why. Graduate students should be invited to discuss Dr. Smith's views - even to challenge them if they seem too restrictive for scientific research. But it is in such discussions rather than in individual situations outside the lab (such as meeting an old high school friend) that challenges should be made. Meanwhile, Lisa should not take matters into her own hands and tell her old friend the "secrets" of her research.