



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Left in the Dark

Year

2002

Description

This case discusses four major ethical issues: data fraud, authorship, the mentor-student relationship, and journal editors' responsibility.

Body

Dr. Conway is a tenured associate professor of biochemistry at a large research institution. His research group consists primarily of graduate students. Since Conway likes to see work in progress, he requires all of his students to participate in individual meetings as well as group meetings with him every week. He insists on seeing each piece of data and working through the projects with his students.

Elizabeth is a second year graduate student in the biochemistry department, and Conway is her thesis research adviser. Elizabeth has recently completed the majority of the coursework that is required by her program and is becoming more involved in her thesis project. Her research focuses on purifying a novel protein complex from mammalian cells and testing its effect on the regulation of a specific cell cycle gene. Although she has completed only a few experiments, some of her initial data look promising.

Conway has not published a manuscript in more than a year. Sensing that many of his peers are making progress in areas related to his own, he is feeling pressure to extend his publication record, in order to remain competitive in their field of research. In order to remedy his current situation, he decides to begin writing a

manuscript that includes some of Elizabeth's data. He is aware that many of the experiments have not yet been reproduced or are still in the process of being repeated. He meets frequently with Elizabeth about her progress, and they go over all of her data regularly. Based on this involvement, there is little chance that he could have been misled about the preliminary status of the work.

On a recent occasion, he asked Elizabeth if he could look through her notebook, because he would like to evaluate and think about her data. Elizabeth willingly gave him her notebook. Conway finished writing and putting together the figures, and he submitted a manuscript for publication without telling Elizabeth. Conway listed Elizabeth as first author on the paper and himself as the second and final author. He submitted to the journal *Molecular and Cellular Biology* and recommended an editor who has been a personal and professional friend of his for many years.

When Elizabeth realizes that her adviser has submitted a paper with her name on it without her consent, she is very upset with him. If any of the data turn out to be erroneous, her scientific career could be damaged. She has just begun her involvement in a research environment, and she is unsure about how to react or if she should do anything at all. She tries to convince herself that maybe this is the way things are done. She has been working in Conway's lab for only a short time, and she is not very comfortable with him yet. She wonders if she should talk with some of the other graduate students about what has happened, hoping that they can help her deal with the situation.

Discussion Questions

1. Who, if anyone, should Elizabeth talk with about the possible publication of very preliminary experiments? Fellow students? The department head?
2. Should she talk with Conway first to ask about his authorship policies?
3. Should she just forget about the manuscript submission for now and work on trying to reproduce the experiments that were included?
4. Is it justifiable for professors to recommend a friend to edit or peer review their manuscripts?
5. Is it ethical for a researcher to submit a manuscript without the consent of all authors?
6. At this stage in her graduate career, what complications might Elizabeth face if she changed research advisers?

Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 6, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 2002.

Contributor(s)

Brian Schrag

Editor(s)

Brian Schrag

Rights

The Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE) grants permission to use these case and commentary material with the citation indicated above.

Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Hypothetical / Fictional Case

Parent Collection

Graduate Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries - Volume 6, 2002

Topics

Authorship

Collaboration

Data Management

Mentors and Trainees

Publication Ethics

Research and Practice

Discipline(s)

Biochemistry

Life and Environmental Sciences

Research Ethics

Publisher

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics

Authoring Institution

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE)