

Deborah Johnson's Commentary on "Questions on the Topic of Whistle Blowing"

Commentary On
Questions on the Topic of Whistle Blowing

At the outset, it is important to point out that Thomas should not leap to a conclusion about Dr. Woodward. Admittedly, the situation looks serious from the students' reports, but there may be another side to the story. In a sense, an accusation has been made, but all the evidence is not yet in. Thomas must be fair to Woodward as well as to the students. It is possible, for example, that Woodward gave the students placebos, or that the students have underplayed their role in the use of the drug. In either case, Woodward's behavior would still be irresponsible, but Thomas should proceed carefully in order to be fair to all involved.

Thomas should take action; the accusations are too serious to ignore. It is difficult to specify a particular action because Thomas's best course depends on details that are not specified in the case. Are there designated individuals to handle grievances? Are there senior faculty who can be trusted to keep conversations confidential? Thomas could go to a department chair or director of graduate studies and request that his report be kept confidential and that he not be compelled to name the students. Keeping Thomas or the students anonymous, however, is a tricky business. For one thing, our legal system recognizes the value of knowing your accusers; this right diminishes the likelihood of false accusations. Also, if Woodward has done what the students accuse him of doing, then if anyone inquires about his activities, he is likely to infer which students have made the accusations.

It is irrelevant whether Thomas believes the beta-blockers to be harmless or not. If Woodward is not licensed to administer such drugs to humans, then what he is doing is wrong whether the drugs are harmful or harmless. Of course, Thomas may not know whether Woodward is licensed. By reporting his concerns to an appropriate person, he would leave it to the other person to find out whether Woodward is licensed.

Until all the information has been gathered, it is difficult to determine whether the students bear any responsibility. However, if their reports are accurate, it would seem that they bear some responsibility: They were not forced to take the beta-blockers, and they should have known that it was inappropriate for them to do so. We don't have enough information to indicate the extent of their responsibility. In any case, their contribution to the activity may not diminish Woodward's responsibility for his behavior.

If the students' accusations are true, then Woodward's conduct reflects quite directly on his ability to do good science. That is, his behavior indicates a degree of recklessness and a disregard for legal constraints. The accusations also suggest the possibility that he has manipulated his students into serving as subjects for research without their even knowing that they are doing so. Moreover, the accusations suggest that he may be encouraging students to become dependent on drugs to succeed rather than encouraging them to make it on their own abilities.

Insofar as Woodward's behavior may reflect his attitude toward the rules of science and his mentoring of students, it is relevant to his tenure decision. The problem with regard to his tenure decision is, however, that at this point what we have are accusations; accusations, without investigation and hearing, can do a great deal of damage. So while Thomas should bring the accusations forward, he should do so in a manner that gives Woodward a fair opportunity to defend himself.

Thomas should report the situation to an appropriate person such as a department chair or director of graduate programs. He then must hope that the situation will be handled appropriately.