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Authorship

Year

2002

Description

This case discusses issues of assignment of authorship, mentor-student relationships, intellectual property and intellectual contribution, and the role of technicians vs. the role of graduate students.

Body

Dr. Messelman Killinger is a cell biologist at Big University who has a policy about authorship that he discusses with each new member who joins his lab. He states that only those who have made a significant intellectual contribution to an experiment will be included on any paper. He also states that he is the final authority about what is defined as a significant intellectual contribution, should a disagreement arise. He further states that he will be included as last author on any paper that is the result of research done in his lab.

David Tonkyn is a post-doc in Killenger's lab and is working to characterize a novel organelle that has been identified in the protozoan parasite *Entamoeba histolytica*. Based on biochemical studies of the purified organelle, David suspects that it may be an as yet unidentified mitochondrion in this organism.

Haruko Tomonaga, a technician in Killinger's lab, has worked very closely with David on his biochemical studies related to this organelle. She has done most of the trouble shooting and optimization for the experimentation. She also developed a novel method of isolating organelles from the organism.

Benson Zophar is a first year graduate student who is currently doing a six-week rotation through Killinger's lab. Benson participates in the final experiment of this project, which shows that a protein normally targeted to mitochondria in other eukaryotes is targeted to this novel organelle in *Entamoeba*. These data suggest that the novel organelle may indeed be a mitochondrion.

Killinger encourages David to submit the data for publication as quickly as possible. David does the writing, gives the paper to Haruko for review, and then presents the data at the lab meeting the following week. Following the meeting, Killinger, David, Haruko and Benson discuss authorship assignments for the paper. David makes the point that since Haruko offered novel ideas to the project and helped in trouble-shooting and in the review of the paper, she should be included as second author. He further argues that although Benson assisted on the last experiment of the project, he did not contribute intellectually and therefore should not be listed as an author. David states that Benson should be included in the acknowledgements for his contributions to the project. Finally, David states that Killinger should be included as last author on the paper since the work was done in his lab and supported by funds from his grant. All present are in agreement with David's decision, and the paper is submitted.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with the order of authorship that David proposed? Why or why not?
2. Is it ethical to include Haruko (the technician), but not to include Benson (the graduate student) on the list of authors for this paper?
3. Does it matter that Benson was just rotating through the lab and not (as yet) a regular member?
4. What constitutes a significant intellectual contribution? Who should decide?

Notes

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