

Editorial

Science fiction in the Ivory Tower

I suppose there are many people that we expect to be less than forthright in statements to the general public. One does not, however, expect the hallowed halls of academia and science to be tainted by scandal involving fraud and deception. Two more cases, coming on the heels of the controversy surrounding AIDS researchers Robert Gallo and Luc Montagnier and the discovery of the AIDS virus, have increased the public debate, and the public skepticism, about scientific integrity.

Is cold fusion a pipe dream concocted by an Anglo-American partnership in science fiction? If not, why can no one else seem to reproduce the data? It is incredible that a pair of scientists would actually try to pull the wool over the eyes of the scientific community to this degree. But now the 1989 Fleischmann and Pons paper is discredited, and the investigation into the matter is getting more like a spy drama every day, as the authors go into seclusion or disappear for lengths of time. While Fleischmann and Pons continue to deny any wrongdoing, they are at least guilty of prematurely jumping into the public arena with a "discovery" that cannot be duplicated by others. Time will tell if their work stands up to further scrutiny.

The latest controversy involves the President of Rockefeller University and one of the most respected scientists in the United States, David Baltimore. Why would a Nobel laureate allow a paper to be published with his name as a coauthor, without being sure that the data reported by one of his senior scientists were accurate? Perhaps more importantly, why would he not conduct a full and complete investigation when a junior researcher accused a coworker of misconduct and the research in question bore Baltimore's name? Instead of conducting a full investigation, Baltimore allegedly asked the whistle blower to give up her place

in the laboratory. Meanwhile, the accused senior scientist was later appointed to a prestigious position on the faculty of Tufts University, presumably with the aid of Baltimore's recommendation.

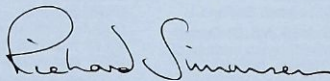
I can understand relying on the honesty and integrity of friends and coworkers. Where would we be if we could not rely on and trust coworkers? But, when a serious accusation is leveled at the validity of data that may affect the future direction of scientific research and the health care of the public, the matter deserves a full and complete investigation.

I worry that this is just the tip of the iceberg. The pressure of "publish or perish" has put careers on the line. Fear of job loss may lead scientists and university faculty to desperate acts.

I hope I am wrong and that these latest revelations are simply isolated incidents. But if deception can occur at such high levels in the scientific community, we must expect further unsettling disclosures. Clearly, science and academia are not sheltered from fear, greed, or blind ambition.

Science's reputation is on the line. We must clean up our own house or the politicians will clean us up with decreased funding for research. This will hurt everyone, particularly the public, which eventually benefits from that research.

Making mistakes is expected and forgivable. Fudging data is not. Science fiction must be left to storytellers. Storytellers should stay out of science.



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