



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# The Unknown Bacteria

## Author(s)

Mildred Chaparro  
Carlos Delannoy  
Doris Ramírez  
Arturo Villamil

## Year

1999

## Description

A professor charges for work done by his graduate student.

## Body

## Part 1, Background

Dr. Pérez has had a microorganism, isolated by a colleague, stored under glycerol in the laboratory refrigerator for about three months. Luis, a graduate student who has spent a year in Dr. Pérez's lab, is working on his thesis project, which requires extensive studying and practice in bacterial systematics. One morning, Luis answers the lab's phone and takes a message for Dr. Pérez, from a Dr. Turner, Director of the Merle Pharmaceutical Research Company. He was asking if Dr. Pérez had been able to do something related to the identification of the bacteria that was sent to him a while back. Dr. Pérez assigned the examination of this bacteria to Luis, in addition to his thesis work.

Luis worked with the identification of the bacteria for two months at the same time he was working on his thesis. The identification of this unknown bacteria was done using the same procedures Luis used on his own thesis work.

### **Questions:**

1. Given that this new assignment meant additional work for Luis, could he have refused to do it?
2. Could/Should there be an arrangement between Luis and Dr. Pérez with respect to the results obtained in this job?

## **Part II**

Luis prepared the report about the identity of the bacteria. It turned out to be a species that wasn't described in the literature, which is why it was hard to identify. It was from the family Vibrionaceae, which doesn't grow if some salts and essential nutrients are not added to the medium with them. It was a time consuming job for Luis, but in the end the bacteria was identifiable. As Luis explained about the bacteria Dr. Pérez left aside what he was doing, paid close attention to Luis, and asked for the details of the identification process.

Luis and Dr. Pérez discussed the identification strategy for an hour. Just after Luis left Dr. Pérez's office, the latter called Dr. Turner and gave him the good news that he identified the microorganism and that he would send him the report with the bill. That same afternoon Dr. Pérez submitted an abstract to the following annual convention of the American Society of Microbiology in which he figured as the only author.

### **Questions:**

1. Do you consider it appropriate that Dr. Pérez attributed the identification of the bacteria to himself and that he figured as the only author of the work to be presented?
2. Is it acceptable professional behavior for a professor be paid for a job done in the university's facilities by one of his graduate students?

# Part III

Luis presented a complaint to the Biology Director that Dr. Pérez got paid for a job that he did as his graduate student and was going to present the results in a meeting with himself as the only author. The Director inquired into the issue, first by verifying that Luis had spoken first to Dr. Pérez about the matter. Luis responded that the professor expelled him from the laboratory. The director sent for Dr. Pérez, who explained that in the presentation he was planning to recognize Luis' technical work, and that he considered it disrespectful that the student would question how he managed his laboratory.

## Questions:

1. Is it acceptable that Luis confront Dr. Pérez?
2. If you were the Director, what action would you have taken with respect to the situation presented by the graduate student?

## Notes

Author(s): Dr. Mildred Chaparro, Dr. Carlos Delannoy, Dr. Doris Ramírez and Dr. Arturo Villamil (developed during the workshop “Ética 99”).

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