



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

To Review or Not: Reviewing the Competition

Year

1998

Description

This case addresses issues of peer review, the need for more explicit guidelines and the ethical dilemmas faced by reviewers when avoiding conflicts of interest and maintaining confidentiality.

Body

[Phase 1](#)

[Phase 2](#)

[Phase 3](#)

Phase 1

Professor John Slater is supervising a research project conducted by Alice Parker, a graduate student in Slater's lab. Parker is trouble-shooting a protein purification protocol; she wants to use the protocol to purify a recombinant form of a mammalian protein growth factor expressed in bacteria. Parker needs the purified protein to complete the final experiment required to prove her experimental model. Parker and Slater intend to submit a manuscript based on this model to *The Journal*

of Cool Results.

While Parker is trouble-shooting the protocol, *The Journal of Cool Results* sends Slater a manuscript to review; he is asked to return the manuscript with his comments and recommendation for publication. The manuscript turns out to be from a competitor's lab, and the title indicates that the work closely resembles the work Parker and Slater intend to publish.

Discussion Questions

1. Should Slater review the manuscript, given that he hopes to publish in the same area?

Phase 2

Slater considers the situation. He decides that he can be objective in his review, and he proceeds to read and evaluate the manuscript. After his initial review, he asks Parker for her comments on the manuscript, as the work falls within her field of expertise. Slater and Parker objectively agree that the data are not convincing and that the paper should not be accepted for publication. Slater returns the manuscript to the editor of *The Journal of Cool Results*, with his recommendation that it not be accepted for publication.

Discussion Questions

2. Should Slater have shown the manuscript to Parker?
3. Would it be appropriate for Slater to casually mention the contents of the manuscript in conversation with another colleague?

Phase 3

After reviewing the manuscript, Slater and Parker note that the authors use a recombinant form of the protein growth factor that they purified from yeast using a novel technique. Slater suggests that Parker apply this technique to her purification protocol. The revised protocol works well, and Parker is able to complete the final

experiment. She and Slater complete a manuscript that is accepted for publication in *The Journal of Cool Results*.

Discussion Questions

4. Should Parker have used the technique from the manuscript in her experiment? Can researchers simply disregard data or information that could potentially benefit their own research efforts? Is disregarding such information compatible with the collaborative basis and overall mission of scientific research?
5. If researchers use information from a manuscript they review, how can or should they cite the source?
6. Assume that after reviewing the manuscript and deciding objectively that it should not be accepted for publication, Slater decides that both groups would benefit from a collaboration incorporating both projects. Should he contact the competitor to discuss this possibility?

Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., *Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 2*, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 1998.

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Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Parent Collection

Graduate Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries - Volume 2, 1998

Topics

Collaboration
Confidentiality
Intellectual Property and Patents
Mentors and Trainees
Peer Review
Publication Ethics

Discipline(s)

Computer, Math, and Physical Sciences
Engineering
Life and Environmental Sciences
Research Ethics
Social and Behavioral Sciences

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