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Questions on the Topic of Whistle Blowing

Year

1998

Description

This case discusses issues of whistle-blowing in an academic environment, publication, credit, collaboration, and the student-mentor relationship as it relates to academic careers.

Body

Thomas, a fifth-year graduate student, was in the final days of completing his Ph.D. in the Department of Anatomical Sciences at State University. He had already accepted a post-doctoral fellowship at an academic institution and was eager to finish his work at State University and begin his new research project.

One day, on a break from writing his dissertation, Thomas went to lunch with Marilyn and Shawn, new graduate students in Anatomical Sciences. As a senior graduate student in the department, Thomas had actively encouraged Marilyn and Shawn through their first year of courses. He was eager to visit with them over lunch and hear their thoughts after completing the first year.

Over lunch, Marilyn and Shawn expressed some anxiety about their final grade in Gross Anatomy, the biggest course of their first year. Both students had performed quite poorly on the first test block, but their scores had improved dramatically on subsequent exams. They credited a large part of their success to Hal Woodward,

Ph.D., a popular assistant professor in their department.

Dr. Woodward, it seems, had conversed informally with Marilyn and Shawn immediately after the grades had been posted for the first exam. He expressed concern that much of their poor performance was probably a result of test anxiety. As a possible solution, Dr. Woodward offered to give Marilyn and Shawn beta-blockers before the next exam to reduce their stress response and enable them to improve their performance. Marilyn and Shawn were hesitant at first, but Dr. Woodward reassured them by saying, "A lot of people involved in stressful events take beta-blockers to help them relax." Dr. Woodward had even given them a trial dose before a regular class meeting to convince the students that they would not experience any adverse side effects.

After the trial dose proved uneventful, the students agreed to take the drugs before the next exam. In hind sight, Marilyn and Shawn admitted to Thomas that they had prepared more diligently for the second exam, but they were quick to add that the beta-blockers enabled them to apply their knowledge calmly. Consequently, both students performed significantly better on the second exam. Dr. Woodward continued to dispense beta-blockers for Marilyn and Shawn before the third exam and the final exam, and both students achieved satisfactory results.

Thomas was dumbfounded as he heard the events of the past semester recounted. He knew that Dr. Woodward used a number of cardiovascular drugs including beta-blockers for research purposes, but there were strict regulations against distributing medication to humans without a proper license. In addition, Thomas believed that potentially dangerous side effects were associated with beta-blocker use in selected populations.

Thomas was in a bind. He felt some responsibility to act on his knowledge of the situation, but Dr. Woodward served on his graduate committee and had been very generous in advising and assisting Thomas. To further complicate matters, Dr. Woodward was involved in the process of obtaining tenure. Information of this nature would certainly jeopardize his promotion.

Discussion Questions

1. Should Thomas act on his knowledge? If so, what should he do, and when?
2. How would your answer change if Thomas believed the beta-blockers were completely harmless?

3. Would the situation be different if Dr. Woodward were an M.D./Ph.D.?
4. Is Dr. Woodward's behavior pertinent to his ability to conduct "good science" to mentor graduate students?
5. Do Marilyn and Shawn bear any responsibility in this situation? Why, or why not?

Notes

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