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The Lisa Bach Case

Year

1997

Description

This case discusses issues of post-doc mentor/student relationships, intellectual property, publication, credit, authorship and collaboration.

Body

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Part 1

Lisa is a post-doc who has been working at a major research university for the past year and a half. Since she arrived, she has gotten along well with her boss, Dr. Richard Bell. The work in his lab relates to the synthesis and characterization of anti-cancer agents.

Lisa's first project was the synthesis of divialan, which has been difficult to synthesize in the lab. It is a compound that was found in a species of plant that only grows in the Swiss Alps. About six months after her arrival, she developed a few more steps of the synthesis, and things looked very promising. One month later, working on a crucial step in the reaction, she found that a divialan derivative was being produced in large quantities and only few impurities in low quantities were

found in the product mixture.

Lisa told Bell, "Rick, you have to take a look at this result on a reaction I performed. I believe that it is a derivative of divialan." Bell looked at the data, "Lisa, this is great," he said. "I will have to study the data more closely to know for sure. Let me look at it in more detail and if it looks good I will start writing a paper for submission." Lisa had a lot of work to do on other characterizations, and she agreed.

A month and a half later, Lisa was talking with Pete, a post-doc in another lab. Lisa was saying, "I have been having a lot of trouble trying to get the final steps in the synthesis of divialan, but I did get a surprising derivative along the way." She went on to describe the procedure to obtain the derivative. Pete was a little surprised. He said, "I was just at a meeting, and Rick presented that same synthesis. The thing is that your name wasn't mentioned in the presentation." Lisa was very surprised.

Discussion Questions:

- What can Lisa do to get the credit she deserves?
- Should she confront Bell?

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Part 2

Later that afternoon, Lisa ran into Bell, "Hey, Rick -- I was wondering how the paper is coming along. Do you have any questions about the procedures or the data?" Bell said, "Everything seemed pretty straightforward. Come to my office, and I will give you a copy to look at and revise, if you would like." "That would be great," Lisa answered.

The paper did not include a title or author list. She returned the copy with revisions, a proposed title and a list of authors.

A month later, Lisa inquired about the article again. "Rick, how is the article?" Bell responded, "Well, it went great. I was glad to get your comments and I completed it and sent it off a couple of days ago." She felt weird about this answer, not having seen the final draft, but since it had already been sent off she didn't press the issue.

Over the next several months, Lisa worked hard on the synthesis and characterization of divialan. Every once in a while, she asked Bell about the paper. He told her that the referees were still reviewing it and he was making minor adjustments to please them.

Lisa is now writing up her CV and wants to put together her list of publications. She asks Bell about the paper. He says, "Oh, I have been meaning to give you some copies of the paper. It was accepted and will be in the next publication. I will leave some copies in your mailbox." When Lisa got them, she looked it over and noticed that her name did not appear until the acknowledgments. She became infuriated. She is now wondering what her options are.

Discussion Questions

- Could Lisa have avoided this situation?
- What kind of rights does she have concerning the work she performed?

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Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., *Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 1*,
Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 1997.

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Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

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Graduate Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries - Volume 1, 1997

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Publisher

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics

Authoring Institution

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE)

Volume

1