



Online Ethics Center
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Collaboration and Credit

Year

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Description

This case discusses issues regarding an interdepartmental and cross-disciplinary research discussion group dynamic found at many medical schools and medical research centers, specifically the presentation of data that originated from another lab without the consent of that lab chief.

Body

Robert Kent, M.D., is an established and highly regarded investigator and clinician in breast cancer research and treatment. He holds a faculty position at a large medical institution, where he serves as the Director of the Schrag Center for Breast Cancer research and oversees the allocation of considerable federal monies granted to the Center. In this position, he acts as the facilitator of scientific discussions among clinicians and basic scientists doing work in breast cancer at his center. The members of the group hold appointments in various departments. While many of these investigators receive funding from the Schrag Center, all of them have their own resources as well (NIH, NSF, ACS, etc.). The investigators and members of their labs meet weekly to discuss the progress of each lab.

During a recent meeting, John, a graduate student, represented the lab of Dr. Sylvia Barry, Ph.D. Although John's work is not funded through a Schrag Center grant, Dr. Barry wanted to get feedback on John's new data. John presented some extremely interesting preliminary data (one set of replicates) regarding two drugs (Casodin and

Fluox), both currently in clinical use. John's research shows that, when used together, these drugs dramatically inhibit the growth and progression of aggressive breast cancer tumors in mice. Dr. Kent and the rest of the group were very interested in John's findings since they held some promise for novel, efficacious therapies with drugs already in use in the clinics.

A few weeks later, Dr. Barry received a phone call from a long-time friend and colleague.

Dr. Barry: Jim, it's great to hear from you. How have you been? I read your last article; it looks like you are really on to something.

Jim: Well, I thought I was moving fast until I saw Dr. Kent give a talk with data from his lab at the International Breast Cancer Meeting last week. I remembered you two were at the same university and wanted to get your opinion of his findings.

Dr. Barry: Well, sure, I guess. To be honest, I haven't heard anything from his lab in quite a while. We both participate in our university's Breast Cancer Research Discussion Group, but those discussions are very informal. In fact, his lab skipped their turn to present data, and that was almost six months ago. What new data did he present?

Jim: He showed numerical data about a novel combination therapy he has been working on, something with Casodin and Fluox.

Dr. Barry: Oh, were these data from mice experiments?

Jim: Yeah. I thought you would be familiar with it. He claimed the results were preliminary, but the three sets of experimental replicates looked impressive.

Dr. Barry: And you're sure this was his work? He presented it as his work with replicate experiments?

Jim: Yup. Well, actually, he said his group. He's such a smart guy.

Dr. Barry: Listen, Jim, I've got to go. I'll talk to you later.

Dr. Barry immediately went to Dr. Kent's office to discuss the incident. Dr. Kent was shocked by Dr. Barry's reaction.

Dr. Kent: Listen, Sylvia, we're really on to something here, and I thought the scientific community needed to benefit from our findings. You weren't planning to attend the meeting, and this is ground-breaking stuff. As the leader of the discussion group and the senior faculty member, I felt the meeting was a great opportunity to present those data.

Dr. Barry: Excuse me, Dr. Kent, but when did they become our data? John's work isn't even funded by the Schrag Center! This is absolutely outrageous behavior.

Dr. Kent: Well, then I wonder if you are interested in the drug company offers I have been getting to develop a combined delivery system. I really think we can work together on this, Sylvia. I hope you can put aside your reservations. This is just the way science works.

Discussion Questions

1. What should Dr. Barry do?
2. Was Dr. Kent justified in sharing John's data at the meeting? What if they were not preliminary data? Should Dr. Kent have any authority over the dissemination of any data discussed at the weekly group meetings?
3. What if John's work were funded by the Schrag Center?

Notes

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