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## The Chance Meeting

### Year

1999

### Description

This case discusses a possible conflict of interest between mentor and student and the dissemination of information within academia.

### Body

Lisa Jones is a graduate student in the lab of Dr. John Smith at State University, where she studies the pathology of SMEL virus, a highly pathogenic virus that has experienced a recent resurgence due to the appearance of drug-resistant strains. Lisa has set out to examine a hypothesis posed by a competing lab headed by Dr. Shirley Frank. In vitro experiments by members of Dr. Frank's lab have suggested that SMEL protease is able to cleave SMEL protein X. It has been suggested that this reaction occurs in vivo and is essential for activating SMEL protein X, which promotes viral DNA replication. Lisa plans to isolate SMEL protein X early in the viral life cycle with the hope of capturing the uncleaved SMEL protein X. Unfortunately, utilizing SMEL strain A, Lisa has been unable to purify SMEL protein X. Upon switching to strain B, Lisa has generated preliminary data that suggest that she has succeeded in isolating a larger, perhaps uncleaved, form of SMEL protein X.

Soon after Lisa conducted these preliminary experiments, a viral conference was held at a nearby university. Prior to the conference, Dr. Smith told the lab that many competitors would be attending and instructed them to say nothing about results generated by the lab. At the poster session, Lisa ran into Steve Jones, an old friend

she hasn't seen since high school. Steve is a graduate student in Dr. Frank's group and was a participant in the lab's in vitro experiments with SMEL protease and protein X. Lisa became nervous when she discovered Steve's objectives were similar to her own. But she realized that he was implementing a slightly different technique and utilizing strain A. So far, all Steve's attempts have failed.

Lisa apprehensively approached Dr. Smith and informed him that Steve's plans were not identical to hers and asked whether she should mention her experience with strain A to her old friend. Dr. Smith emphatically answered, "No!" Lisa, feeling that any action contradictory to Dr. Smith's instruction would jeopardize her relationship with her mentor, decided not to mention her results to Steve.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What should Lisa tell Steve?
2. Should Dr. Smith instruct his lab not to share information? Why or why not?
3. Should Lisa fear retribution from Dr. Smith if she tells Steve? Is retribution a common occurrence in today's research environment? What alternatives exist for students who experience retribution?
4. Is the practice of withholding information in today's highly competitive research environment necessary or is it self-destructive and contradictory to the advancement of knowledge? What are the consequences of withholding information?

## **Notes**

Brian Schrag, ed., *Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, Volume 3*,  
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## **Resource Type**

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## **Parent Collection**

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## **Topics**

Collaboration

Conflict of Interest

Mentors and Trainees

## **Discipline(s)**

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