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In Need of a Helping Hand

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Description

How should conflicts of interest between interested parties in the clinical setting be resolved when there is a question concerning informed consent, competence and confidentiality. This scenario highlights potential dilemmas encountered by postdoctoral fellows in a research setting.

Body

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Part 1

Doug, a new post-doc in Professor Gordon Cook's lab, is working on a project that involves completing the work of a previous post-doc. Doug is content with this arrangement because the work is closely related to his dissertation research, giving him ample opportunity to get used to his new environment. As Doug works on the project, Cook becomes very impressed with Doug's diligence, resourcefulness and productivity as a scientist. Upon completion of his project, Doug and Cook have the following conversation:

Cook: Doug, you have done a nice job completing this project. Now, I feel that you're ready for a real challenge. How would you like to work on purifying protein X from liver tissue?

Doug (*thinks to himself*): I'm not sure if I have the knowledge and expertise required to undertake a protein purification project from scratch, but it would give me some great publications. Plus, Dr. Cook wouldn't ask me to pursue this project if he felt I wouldn't succeed, would he?

(*replies to Cook*): I'd love to take on the protein purification project. I truly appreciate this opportunity. I know this is a challenging project, but I'm looking forward to getting started.

Cook: Great! I'm happy that you're excited about the project. I have a class to teach now, but if you have any questions or concerns about the project, we can discuss them later.

Doug begins working on the project with a lot of enthusiasm, but his unvoiced hesitations are soon confirmed. He realizes that neither he nor the others in the lab have the knowledge or expertise required to carry out the protein purification project. Doug gets frustrated and goes to Cook for advice.

Doug: Dr. Cook, do you have a few minutes?

Cook: Sure. What is on your mind? How is the protein purification project coming along?

Doug: Well, that is what I wanted to talk to you about. All the procedures I have tried are problematic.

Doug hesitates. He decides not to tell Cook that his expertise in this area is limited and that he has reservations about continuing to work on the project. Instead, he mentions that he still has some other alternatives to test.

However, I still have not tried the procedures used by Kane's group.

Cook (*looking at his watch*): Doug, I know that you are a very capable scientist, and I have the utmost faith in your abilities. (*Cook pats Doug on the back.*) Try the procedure used by Kane's group. If you will excuse me now, I have a meeting to go to. We can discuss this later, if you like.

Doug leaves Cook's office feeling no better than he did before going to him for advice. Doug continues to work on the project but with less enthusiasm and growing frustration.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are Doug's responsibilities to Cook?
2. Should Doug have agreed to work on the protein purification project? Why or why not?
3. What are Cook's responsibilities to Doug?

Part 2

Through a friend, Doug finds out that Maria, a post-doc in Janet Black's lab, is working on purifying a novel protein from kidney tissue. Frustrated, Doug decides to go to Maria for advice.

Doug: Maria?

Maria: Yes?

Doug: Hello, Maria. My name is Doug, and I'm a new post-doc in Cook's lab. Anna told me that you've been working on trying to purify a novel protein from kidney tissue. I'm trying to purify protein X from liver tissue, but with little success. I am at a loss. I tried talking to Cook, but he hasn't been much help. Would you mind pointing me in the right direction?

Maria: Sure. I just spent over four months working out the kinks in my protein purification assay and I would be happy to help you avoid some of the roadblocks that I ran into. Also, I know adjusting to a new lab can sometimes be a challenge.

(Maria says this knowing that Cook has a reputation for giving his post-docs little guidance with difficult projects.)

Doug: Maria, you are a life-saver. *(thinks to himself)* This is the break that I have been waiting for!

Maria gives Doug a few pointers, and Doug leaves. A few days later, Doug shows up at Maria's lab with some preliminary data. Without hesitation, Maria looks over Doug's data and helps to outline his next set of experiments. Doug thanks Maria for her advice and leaves.

Over the next two months, Doug's visits and requests for advice from Maria become more and more frequent. Doug drops by Maria's lab at least three times a week. Maria even allows Doug to use some of her lab's equipment and reagents and shows him how to set up the necessary assays. Initially, Maria was more than willing to help Doug, but over time she begins to feel as if she is taking on the role of his principal investigator, Cook. She wonders whether Doug has told Cook that he is getting help from her. Maria begins to realize that she inadvertently has become invested in Doug's project, and that her own work has been suffering as a result. Meanwhile, Black, Maria's adviser/supervisor, is unaware of her charitable activities.

Discussion Questions:

4. What are Doug's responsibilities to Maria?
5. Does this situation present an ethical dilemma for Maria? Why or why not?
6. How should Maria handle this situation?
7. Should Maria approach Doug and/or Cook about authorship and/or other issues?
8. What is Maria's responsibility to colleagues in her lab and Black?

Notes

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