



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Post-Doc Blues

Year

2006

Description

This case discusses scientific relationships including adviser-graduate student; adviser-post-doc; and post-doc-graduate student. It also explores the relationship of one lab to another lab in the scientific community and intellectual property.

Body

John McGovern is a graduate student in the laboratory of Dr. Julius Martin at XYZ University. His research has focused on the identification and characterization of the Rac GTPases of the amoeba, *Dictyostelium discoideum*.

Bringham Bringham, a post-doc in Martin's lab, has recently identified a Rac GTPase binding protein that she is almost certain is a GTPase-activating protein. She needs to perform only a few more experiments to confirm the role of this protein.

McGovern and Bringham have become good friends and have worked together on many aspects of their projects. As a result, McGovern has become familiar with Bringham's research and data.

McGovern soon will have fulfilled all his requirements for graduation, and he has applied for several post-doc positions. His best possibility is from the lab of Dr. Chen Wang, who works in developmental biology using *Dictyostelium* as a model system. McGovern visits Wang's lab and presents a seminar about his research. After his seminar, Wang discusses McGovern's previous research and shows McGovern some of his own data on a protein that he has isolated from *Dictyostelium*. Since

McGovern has experience in the characterization of proteins from *Dictyostelium*, Wang suggests that it may be a good idea for McGovern to characterize this new protein should he choose to come to Wang's lab. After reviewing Wang's data, McGovern quickly recognizes the similarity between it and Bringham's data back at his old lab. He suspects that Wang may have isolated the same protein that Bringham is currently characterizing.

Upon returning to Martin's lab, McGovern receives notification in writing that Wang wishes to extend an invitation for McGovern to join his lab. Wang requests a written response as soon as possible.

Discussion Questions

1. Should McGovern accept the position in Wang's lab? Why or why not?
2. Must McGovern discuss the information he learned at Wang's lab with Martin?
Should he inform Bringham that if he accepts this post-doc position he would be doing the same work she is currently doing?
3. If you were Martin and McGovern asked your opinion about what he should do, what advice might you offer?
4. Should McGovern be allowed to take his data from Martin's lab to his new lab?
5. Even if McGovern decides not to take the position in Wang's lab, should he inform Bringham or Martin about Wang's data?

Notes

Brian Schrag, ed., *Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries*, Volume 6, Bloomington, Indiana: Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 2002.

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