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Richard's Radioactive Risk

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Description

This case highlights potential dilemmas encountered by postdoctoral fellows in a research setting, specifically in a lab where conflict between a researcher and lab tech is not monitored by the head of the lab.

Body

Paul is an experienced technician working in Dr. Monson's laboratory. Over the past seven years, he has become Monson's close friend and confidant. Recently, Monson assumed additional administrative responsibilities within the department. Knowing that his time in the laboratory would be decreased, Monson privately asked Paul to begin to manage the laboratory's daily operations.

Lisa joined Monson's laboratory two years ago and is the only post-graduate researcher in the laboratory. Before Paul received his new assignment, Lisa and Paul worked very well together; however, after Lisa heard third-hand about Paul's new position of authority, she felt overlooked and offended. Lisa felt that because she has more formal education than Paul, she should have been asked to manage the laboratory.

Lisa concluded that discussing her feelings with Monson would negatively affect her future career options, so she decided not to speak with Monson. Lisa and Paul maintained a professional relationship for a short while; however, soon their interactions began to sour. Paul sensed Lisa's resentment as a challenge to his

position in the laboratory and began to exert greater authority over the lab equipment. Lisa responded by leaving the equipment dirty after using it. Over time, Lisa and Paul have stopped talking to each other and avoided interacting whenever possible. Nevertheless, when Monson is around, they try to put on a convincing facade of professional respect.

Richard is an undergraduate working in Monson's laboratory with Lisa. He has watched the development of the negative relationship between Paul and Lisa. Lisa has even confided in Richard that she believes that Paul is tampering with some of her experiments to make her look bad. To avoid the rapidly escalating conflict in the laboratory, Richard quietly and quickly performs his assigned duties each day and then leaves as early as possible. As time passes, the situation dramatically worsens.

The crucial incident

One evening Lisa asks Richard to stay a bit late and finish an incubation step in a protocol. He agrees, and Lisa goes home. Paul is still in the laboratory working, but he is unaware that Richard is there too. Richard's cubicle is positioned so that he can easily see Paul's bench and Lisa's cubicle. Paul puts on some gloves and begins to work at his lab bench. Richard has an important exam the next day, so he begins to study at his cubicle. Paul is still unaware that Richard is in the laboratory. After studying for a few minutes, Richard notices that Paul is doing something in Lisa's cubicle space. Richard cannot directly see what Paul is doing. Soon, Paul emerges from Lisa's cubicle. Richard sees that Paul is carefully holding a vial, which he sets on his bench; he cautiously discards his gloves and walks out of the lab.

Richard curiously goes to see what was in the vial. The vial is a well-marked radioactive container. He feels very uneasy. Before Paul returns to the laboratory, Richard quickly finishes the incubation and goes home.

Discussion Questions

1. What should Richard do?
2. What responsibility did Richard have to inform Lisa about his observation?
3. What are the risks Richard assumes and ethical conflicts he faces in informing or not informing Lisa?

After much thought and deliberation, Richard calls Lisa at home and explains what he saw. Lisa thanks him for alerting her. Lisa arrives at the lab early the next day and tests her cubicle for the presence of any radioactive residues. Lisa finds that her chair may be contaminated. Lisa contacts the Office of Laboratory Safety (OLS). An OLS worker comes to the lab and confirms that Lisa's chair is contaminated with some sort of radioactive compound. Lisa notifies Monson about the situation. After speaking with Monson, Paul confesses to putting the radioactive substance on Lisa's chair.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the proper and improper actions of Lisa, Paul, Richard, Monson and the institution?
2. Was Paul the only person who should have accepted responsibility?
3. Although this case may seem overly dramatic and even extreme, the fact that it did occur (reported here with minor interpretational modifications) poignantly demonstrates the powerful role of interpersonal relationship within a working context. How could this incident have been avoided?

Notes

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