

# Michael Pritchard's Commentary on "The Co-Authorship Controversy"

Commentary On  
The Co-Authorship Controversy

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## Part 1

At first glance, it seems appropriate for Dr. McClair to suggest to Peggy that she do some of her experiments in Dr. Gleeson's laboratory. The lab was well set up for the experiments, and Peggy would have the advantage of working with another set of researchers. In all, it seems that Peggy will benefit a great deal from this arrangement.

However, at second glance, some questions should be raised. Just what is the relationship between McClair and his collaborator? Was McClair thinking primarily about how Peggy's work might benefit from working with Gleeson, or was he thinking more about how he and his collaborator might benefit? This issue is complicated by the tension that seems to exist between McClair/Gleeson and Peggy's adviser, Dr. Jones. Jones apparently told Peggy that she was reluctant to have Peggy visit Gleeson's lab because her work paralleled McClair/Gleeson's to a significant degree. We seem to have colleagues in competition within the same academic department. At least Jones is reluctant to share her own (and Peggy's) unpublished results with McClair/Gleeson. We are not told whether McClair/Gleeson are similarly reluctant. In any case, a possible reading of the scenario is that McClair/Gleeson are prepared to gain access to Jones's work via Peggy. If that is a

plausible reading, then McClair's motives are highly questionable even if it should turn out that Peggy's work is strengthened. Essentially, she is being viewed more as a resource by McClair/Gleeson than as a student they are helping to complete a successful dissertation. We might wonder if McClair has a conflict of interest.

Similar questions might be raised about Jones's position. Presumably, Peggy's aim is to complete her research and write a successful dissertation. Jones, as her adviser, has a responsibility to advise her well in the pursuit of these ends. Working with Gleeson may be in Peggy's best interest but contrary to Jones's interests. We need to ask whether Jones has a conflict of interest.

To her credit, Jones does alert Peggy to her concerns. However, it seems that the burden is placed on Peggy to work out whatever problems this arrangement might pose, since it is Peggy, not Jones, who confers with McClair/Gleeson about Jones's concerns. The McClair/Gleeson response is puzzling. They assure Peggy that her going to the London lab is "a collaboration and that she should definitely be willing to share her research." At this point it would have been advisable for Peggy to get this assurance from Jones as well. Better, Jones, McClair and Gleeson should have conferred in order to clarify, to their mutual satisfaction, what Peggy's role would be; and their understanding should have been communicated clearly to Peggy before she was expected to decide whether to go to London.

Unfortunately, Peggy is caught in the middle. This is not a problem of her making; yet it seems that she has been given primary responsibility for working it out. At this point, it seems that neither Jones nor McClair/Gleeson have exhibited appropriate sensitivity to Peggy's best interests. I would give them low marks as advisers.

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## Part 2

The fact that Peggy received a preprint of the paper from Gleeson's lab indicates that the lab acknowledges Peggy's helpfulness on the project. Whether she deserves a listing as co-author is the key question. If they did, indeed, use a protocol that Peggy had established as part of her dissertation, it seems that she might have a case for being listed. At this point she should consult with both McClair and Jones. They should be in a good position to assess the strength of her contribution, and

they are thoroughly familiar with the standard criteria used in establishing author lists. As a collaborator, McClair should be familiar with the work of the Gleeson lab; and, as one of Peggy's advisers, he should be willing to fight for whatever she is due. Jones, as Peggy's main adviser, should be willing to go to bat for Peggy, and she will not have the constraints McClair might feel because he collaborates with Gleeson.

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## Part 3

Gleeson's reasons for not including Peggy as co-author are questionable, as stated. If Peggy's protocols were used, that might be a basis for co-authorship even if she did not conduct the experiments herself. Presumably there are other authors who did not conduct these experiments. Gleeson's claim that they were planning to do these studies prior to Peggy's arrival might be true in a general sense. The question is whether she contributed in some more specific way to the success of the experiments (by offering her protocols, e.g.). If the answer is negative, then we need to ask why Gleeson sent her the preprint, with its acknowledgment of her help. Just how did she help? Finally, it isn't clear how listing Peggy would detract from the merit of a post-doc in the lab who was applying for jobs. But even if it did, that does not seem to be relevant to the issue of whether Peggy should be listed. In fact, if that is the true reason she was not listed, the other reasons offered seem to be a smoke screen.

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## Part 4

Sadly, Peggy's plight in Part 4 is evidence that things went badly for her from the outset. Basically, McClair and Jones attempt to bail out, leaving Peggy on her own. It is unreasonable to think that, as a graduate student, Peggy could have anticipated where all of this might lead. Clearly, it was in her best interests to have the terms of her work in the London lab spelled out in advance as much as possible. Jones should have been insistent on Peggy's behalf. That would have required her to talk directly with McClair and Gleeson. McClair and Gleeson should have been as explicit as they could be with Peggy from the outset. A sign that things might not go well is that,

even at this initial juncture, full responsibility seemed to be placed on Peggy to attend to all these matters; yet, of all the parties in this story, she was the least prepared to handle such responsibility.

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