

Integrity in Scientific Research:

Creating an Environment That Promotes Responsible Conduct

This report and by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and two current editorials in major scientific journals-the Lancet (Aug 17) and Science (Aug 23)-all reveal an astonishing lack of resolve to hold scientists who have been found guilty of scientific misconduct-including fraud-accountable for their actions.

The Lancet editorial states:

"The IOM report recognises the multiple players involved: individual researchers; institutions; funding agencies; journals; scientific societies; governments; and the environment in which research is conducted, such as public opinion and sociopolitical priorities. The recent adoption by several journals, The Lancet included, of more transparency in conflict of interest disclosure was named as a positive step to influence research integrity, albeit indirectly. All these participants have complex reciprocal relationships with one another. The report rightly categorises the individual scientist as both the most influential and the most unpredictable variable. But it places the responsibility for dealing with research integrity firmly on research institutions."

[See, Lancet, Volume 360, Number 9332 17 August 2002. www.thelancet.com]

Science editor, Donald Kennedy, turned his gaze away from the major ethical lapses, writing instead, about what he calls, "Not Wicked, Perhaps, but Tacky" ethical lapses.

"So what we have here is a growing list of behaviors that, taken together, exemplify the gradual retreat from generosity and straight dealing in a community that is usually known for those qualities. Perhaps the core element of "tacky" in these examples is that they all eat away at the sense of community, shared understanding, and public trust that are crucial to science."

[Science, Volume 297, Number 5585, Issue of 23 Aug 2002, p. 1237. www.sciencemag.org]

The IOM and Lancet cannot bring themselves to recommend holding wrongdoers accountable-even when they have been caught violating ethical research standards and despoiling the scientific body of knowledge with fraudulent reports.

Neither the IOM-a fraternity of scientists who protect their self-interest-nor Lancet editors offer anything more than vacuous statements about the need for institutions to "develop and implement comprehensive and effective educational programmes to promote integrity." By disregarding the fact that self-assessment and "peer review" have proven ineffective in restraining wrongdoers-they pretend that these exercises and "accreditation" can restore the integrity of medical science.

Why should scientists who commit gross scientific misconduct be absolved from responsibility? Why should scientists not suffer the consequences of their actions? Is the scientific community demanding that its members be held to lower standards than corporate executives who are caught cheating for profit?

The IOM Report: <http://www.nap.edu/books/0309084792/html/>