

Research misconduct? What misconduct?

Why has Canada lagged so far behind its Western counterparts in establishing comprehensive mechanisms and processes to deal with scientific misconduct? Is it inertia? Jurisdictional wrangling? A naive belief that all Canadian researchers are incorruptible? The mistaken notion that secrecy is in the best interest of all concerned because it shields institutions and individuals from having their reputations tarnished?

None of the above justifies continuing inaction, particularly in an era in which scientific findings are widely disseminated and used by Canadians to make health care decisions. Fairly or unfairly, every instance of misconduct tars us all and erodes public trust, as in the cases of Canadian researchers Roger Poisson¹ and Ranjit Chandra.² If fraud is left undiscovered or the scientific record uncorrected, other researchers will waste significant time, energy and money working in blind alleys.³ Also, the lives and health of patients may be jeopardized if health care decisions are based on fraudulent research.¹

Worse yet is the failure to act quickly, firmly and transparently to deal with misconduct. No one can have confidence in the results of Canadian research if we sweep abuses under the carpet. Recognizing that the principled solution is to establish concrete, formal policies and procedures to both minimize and handle research abuses, other nations have long since surpassed Canada. The United States established the Office of Research Integrity in 1993. In 1992 Denmark created the Danish Committees on Scientific Dishonesty, with a joint chair who is a high-court judge. Other countries with established agencies include Germany, France, Finland, Australia and Sweden. The United Kingdom is currently establishing a national agency.

Their approaches vary from investigatory to advisory, but at a minimum they include uniform guidelines and reporting mechanisms as well as some form of tracking and reporting of misconduct complaints. In the United States, the number of complaints reveals a worrisome trend within the research community of pushing the integrity envelope, whether because of raw ambition, competition for grants or pressure from external financiers. The US Office of Research Integrity reported that the number of complaints in 2005 was 265, nearly 50% more than the number in 2003. By contrast, Canadian information is sparse, although the Canadian Institutes of Health Research reports having received 54 complaints between 2000 and 2006. Some 36 were deemed worthy of investigation (by the home university of the alleged misconduct): 21 were found to have violated voluntary council guidelines, and 3 remain under investigation.

Equally problematic is that the Canadian system for handling misconduct is so haphazard and nontransparent that it is impossible to accurately gauge its efficacy, let alone the im-

partiality of investigations or the suitability of punitive or restorative measures.

All this must stop. Enabling legislation should be introduced and passed to create an arm's-length, independent National Research Integrity Agency.² The agency's precise structure, composition and authorities are subject to debate, but *CMAJ* believes the new agency should be answerable to Parliament for establishing and enforcing national rules and procedures to handle misconduct connected to the proposal, performance, review and reporting of research. It should have an educational role and be a quasi-judicial body, perhaps like our provincial colleges, with jurisdiction over all those holding academic appointments who are conducting research, whether publicly or privately funded. It should have an investigatory arm — complete with legal representation to ensure due process — to deal with forms of misconduct such as fraud, falsification, conflict of interest and financial impropriety, so that universities and research institutions are not put in the position of investigating their own, except for lesser transgressions such as ghostwritten research, duplicate publication or misrepresentation on a curriculum vitae.

The new agency should have the authority to enforce suitable penalties, such as withdrawing grant monies or prohibiting the application for new grants, as well as the latitude to refer matters to police when criminal charges are warranted.² It should have clear mechanisms for reporting complaints; it should serve as a national repository for reports on investigations and statistics on misconduct; and it should report annually to the public, so that we can maintain trust while spending billions of tax dollars on health research.

Let's not wait for the next scandal. There have been more than enough to justify pulling our heads out of the sand. The 99% of outstanding Canadian researchers who uphold the ideals of integrity, honesty and trust deserve better protection against the very few who are prepared to abuse our trust.

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