

# Paper retracted as co-author admits forgery

David Adam, London

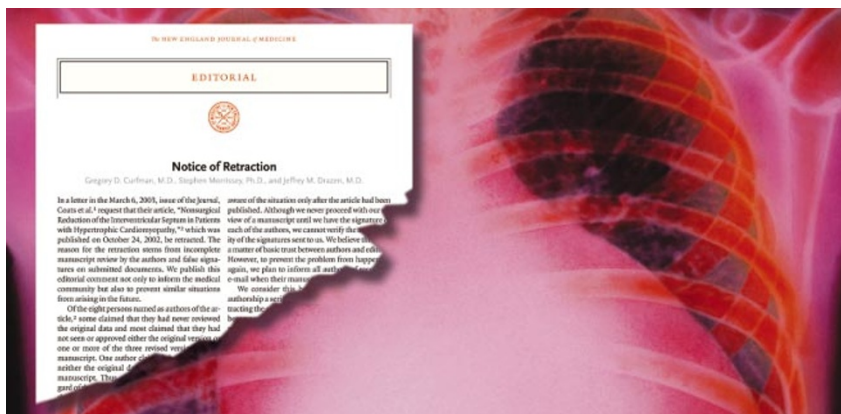
In a case more befitting Sherlock Holmes, London's Imperial College is investigating how several cardiology researchers found themselves authors of a paper that they knew little or nothing about.

The bizarre incident came to light on 10 February, when the *New England Journal of Medicine* published a retraction notice on its website. In it, the editors said that several of the eight authors on the original paper had not seen the original data or copies of the manuscript.

Suspensions were raised as soon as the paper was published on 24 October last year (W. Shamim *et al.* *New Engl. J. Med.* **347**, 1326–1333; 2002). “Over a number of days it became apparent to us that not all of the authors had been fully involved in preparing the paper,” says Gregory Curfman, executive editor of the journal.

But all eight signatures appeared on both the original submission and the three revised versions of the paper that followed. Several of these signatures, it emerged over the following weeks, were forgeries. “There were falsified signatures on the letters accompanying the original and revised versions of the manuscript,” Curfman says.

The paper describes a long-term follow-up study of 64 patients with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a heart condition caused by overgrowth of the muscular wall that separates the left and right ventricles. The



A paper offering hope to patients with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is at the centre of a forgery row.

patients were treated by injecting ethanol into an artery leading to the thickened wall, which reduces the muscle's size.

Curfman puts the blame for the deception squarely on the shoulders of just one of the co-authors, who confessed in a brief letter to the journal that he had forged the signatures. But some people close to the case, including one of the co-authors who had his signature forged and did not want to be identified, point at more than one culprit.

Six of the authors on the papers were listed as having affiliations to the National Heart and Lung Institute at London's Royal Brompton and Harefield Hospital, now part of Imperial College. A spokesperson for

Imperial says that an inquiry, headed by the college's rector, Richard Sykes, is already under way. It is expected to report within three months, and the college will then decide whether disciplinary action is needed.

*Nature* understands that one focus of the inquiry will be the role of two of the paper's authors: Waqar Shamim, a hospital consultant described as an affiliated member of Imperial College, and Mohammed Yousufuddin, a physician who previously worked as a temporary research fellow at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, and who is listed as a student on Imperial's website.

Shamim is the first named author on the paper and, Curfman says, was the corresponding author on each of three previous versions. Yousufuddin is listed as the corresponding author on the published manuscript, which states that both researchers “contributed equally to this article”. Neither Shamim nor Yousufuddin, who has taken legal advice, according to some of those involved, could be traced for comment.

Hubert Seggewiss, a cardiologist at a hospital in Schweinfurt, Germany, and another of the co-authors listed on the paper, says that the article was a total surprise. “The first thing I knew of it was when Yousufuddin rang me two days before its publication to congratulate me, and to ask me about the method involved in case journalists questioned him,” Seggewiss says.

One of the pioneers of the technique described in the paper, Seggewiss says that he has performed it on over 600 patients. But he does not recognize the study in the paper and says that he has never met Shamim or Yousufuddin. “They probably used my name because in the cardiology field I am famous for this technique,” he says.

He says that some of the data “just don't add up”, but adds that Imperial's investigation will establish formally whether or not the conclusions are sound. ■

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## Ministers back gene-crop advisers

Declan Butler, Paris

French government ministers have sprung to the defence of scientists who claim to have been harassed and threatened with violence after they authored a controversial report for the Academy of Sciences on transgenic plants.

In a joint statement issued earlier this month, Claudie Haigneré, junior minister for research and technology, and Luc Ferry, minister for youth, national education and research, condemned the attacks “without reserve”. They said that the methods of intimidation — at which they expressed “astonishment and sadness” — were unacceptable and were an attempt to stifle open debate on the issue of transgenic crops.

The report was submitted to the science ministry last December. It called for “reasoned and careful” introduction of transgenic crops, on a case-by-case basis, as well as an increase in research into the crops that is commensurate with their agricultural and industrial importance.

These conclusions drew criticism from opponents of transgenic crops, who challenged the report's independence. Critics accuse the authors of being active proponents of transgenic technologies. But the ministerial report says that such claims are an attempt to discredit the report's conclusions, and demonstrate “a confession of ignorance or weakness” in the arguments of those who made the threats.

Writing in French newspaper *Le Monde* earlier this year, academy president Etienne-Emile Beaulieu called on the government to defend “the honour of scientists attacked in their mission of delivering independent and educated information to society”.

Roland Douce, director of the Institute of Structural Biology in Grenoble and the report's main author, has been a principal target for the threats. He told *Nature* that such was the ferocity of the critical reaction that he would now think twice before giving public advice in the future. ■