nature medicine

Trading scientific freedom

The US Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has recently taken center stage in a debate on the freedom of scientific communication. The agency imposes trade embargoes on countries viewed as hostile targets, in line with US foreign policy. In September 2003, awareness of these restrictions entered the scientific arena, due to an OFAC letter addressed to the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) in response to queries about submissions from Iranian authors. The letter clarified the OFAC regulations to indicate that manuscript authors from embargoed countries can publish in the US—provided the articles are not altered in any way. A special license is required to edit such contributions because any alteration of works from the affected countries is illegal. On 12 January 2004, the American Society for Microbiology, responding to similar concerns that they might be transgressing US law, adopted a policy of no longer considering papers from Cuba, Iran, Libya and Sudan (see News, page 109). The ramifications of these actions threaten the integrity and freedom of the scientific enterprise.

According to the OFAC, individuals, academic societies or scientific publishing houses based in the US may not substantively alter, edit or enhance an article originating from an embargoed country, as these activities constitute provision of services to those nations. In contrast, publication of 'camera-ready' manuscripts—those that can be published as is—is permitted. With respect to peer review, the regulations are ambiguous. Suggestions arising from peer review are meant to change and therefore improve a manuscript. Such alterations would presumably be prohibited by the OFAC. If so, at what point does communication with authors, which defines the peer-review process, become forbidden or, worse yet, punishable?

The consequences for scientists in the affected countries must be considered. Such discriminatory action against researchers undermines the principles on which scientific advancement rests. The effect of the embargo on international scientific cooperation may be equally detrimental, and has already affected at least one scientific conference in Iran with the withdrawal of IEEE support. Moreover, if a multiple-author contribution has an author based in an affected country, is the paper covered by the embargo? The applicability of the existing regulations to such a case is unclear, but if the answer turns out to be yes, it is easy to see how this would exacerbate discrimination against the affected scientists. Would a US-based researcher risk breaking the law by coauthoring a publication with an embargoed scientist?

How should the scientific community react to these developments? Obtaining a license to handle papers from the countries that are affected by the embargo can be a protracted process. In view of this, it is conceivable, but entirely undesirable, that some journals will take the path of least resistance and avoid dealing with such papers altogether. In this regard, organizations such as the IEEE that opt to apply for licenses deserve cautious recognition, in view of the precedent they may set. The research community must act swiftly to persuade Congress and the OFAC that the embargo does not make sense for the advancement of science. But the solution is far more involved than asking policymakers to consider scientific papers as an exception to trade regulations. Instead, we must point out the inconsistencies and ambiguities of the current regulations, the need to explore seriously the ramifications of regulating the traffic of information, and the fact that there is only one acceptable outcome—the preservation of the freedom of scientific communication.

Celebrating our tenth year

To commemorate our tenth year, *Nature Medicine* will feature a series of articles highlighting major biomedical achievements of the past decade. We have commissioned Historical Perspectives on key topics that have seen significant progress since the inception of the journal. These include therapeutic approaches, neuroscience, metabolic diseases, cancer, infectious diseases, cardiovascular diseases and immunology. Experts in each discipline will write the articles, and the series will be published over the course of 2004.

To further celebrate these fields, Historical News and Views on groundbreaking papers from the last ten years will accompany these perspectives. Each issue will also contain topically-related news stories and profiles featuring outstanding scientists in each field. The collected content of the year will be available on a continually updated website. This Web Focus will also give free access to classic papers from *Nature Medicine* that have helped define the field. We hope you will enjoy these special issues. Please join us in celebrating ten outstanding years at *Nature Medicine*.