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Dubious data remain in print two years after misconduct inquiry

Alison Abbott and Johanna Schwarz, Munich

Many of the 94 scientific papers listed two years ago by a German inquiry as likely to contain manipulated data have yet to be retracted from the literature, *Nature* has discovered.

The suspect papers were identified during a high-profile investigation into misconduct in German cancer research, the results of which were published in June 2000.

Nature surveyed 29 journals asking about their response to the inquiry's findings. Twenty replied, which between them published 60 of the papers. Five said that they had retracted all of the papers (22 in total), one had retracted one of three it had published, and 14 had not retracted any. Among the 20 journals, seven said they were unaware that the investigation had taken place, and four more did not know it had been completed.

Scientific leaders and misconduct investigators around the world have long complained that, even when scientific misconduct is proven, no reliable mechanisms exist to remove bad information from the literature.

"Somebody must be responsible for informing the journals if papers have been found to contain wrong data," says Gerhard Neuweiler, a zoologist at the University of Munich and former president of Germany's science council. "And the journals must find ways to alert the community. Something must happen, because we can expect misconduct to happen more often in the future

— in particular in biomedicine, where the pressure to publish is very high."

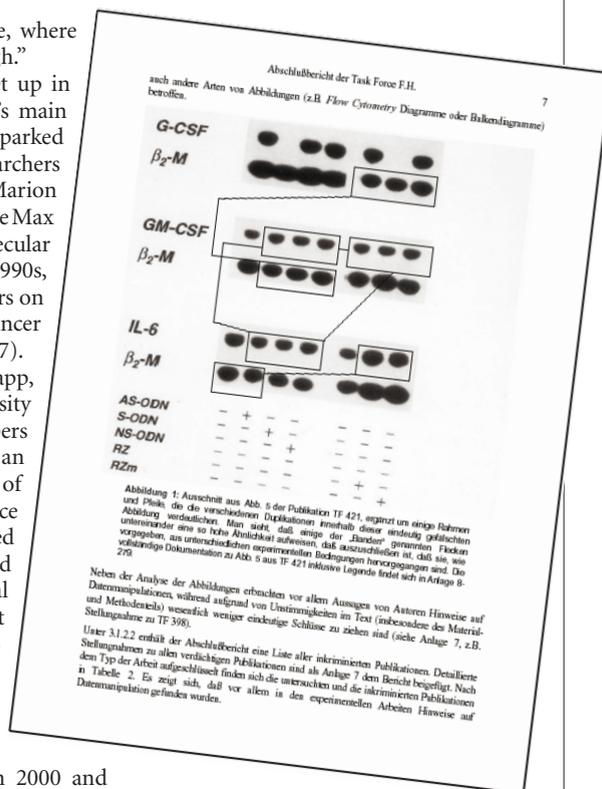
The German inquiry was set up in 1998 by the DFG, the country's main research funding agency. It was sparked by allegations that cancer researchers Friedhelm Herrmann and Marion Brach, who worked together at the Max Delbrück Centre for Molecular Medicine in Berlin in the early 1990s, had fabricated data in four papers on drug-resistance genes and cancer therapy (see *Nature* 387, 442; 1997).

A task force headed by Ulf Rapp, a cell biologist from the University of Würzburg, examined 347 papers co-authored by the pair in an attempt to determine the extent of the fabrication. The task force wrote to all of the journals involved explaining the situation, and requesting records of the original submissions. It concluded that data in 85 papers and 9 book articles had either definitely or "highly probably" been manipulated. A German-language report, complete with a list of suspect papers, was released in 2000 and published on the DFG's website.

But the journals involved were not officially notified of the findings. The main aim of the investigation was not to clean up the literature, DFG officials explain, but to make sure that junior scientists whose names were on the papers could be identified and exonerated.

Rapp, however, says he understood that the task force's work would also help to set the published record straight. He now accuses the DFG of failing to do this by not informing the journals of the inquiry's conclusions. "I reminded the DFG on multiple occasions," he says.

Some editors, too, were expecting to hear about the outcome of the investigation. Barbara Cohen, executive editor of the *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, says that the original task-force letter sent in May 1998 promised this. "We are still waiting for the follow-up," she says. A spokesman for *Acta Haematologica* says that, having heard nothing further from



Data duplication reported by the DFG — this paper has been retracted but others identified as suspicious are still in print.

the task force, "we assumed that the papers were freed from suspicion".

Other editors do not remember the original letter. Mike Kemeny of King's College London, for example, took over as editor-in-chief of *Immunology* two years ago. Alerted by *Nature*'s survey, Kemeny says that he will now "take the issue forward".

Nature's survey also indicates that journals lack a common policy for retracting papers. Although most require authors to request retraction, a few editors were prepared to act independently in the Herrmann and Brach case — partly because Herrmann has been advised by his lawyer not to retract any of his papers.

► www.dfg.de/aktuell/download/abschlussbericht_fh.pdf

