Data falsification

NIH decrees ten-year ban on research grants

Washington

THE National Institutes of Health (NIH) recommended last week that Dr John Darsee, a former Harvard Medical School research fellow found to have fabricated data, be barred from receiving federal research funds for the next 10 years.

NIH will also ask Harvard's Cardiac Research Laboratory at Brigham and Women's Hospital — which was held indirectly responsible for lax supervision that "may have contributed inadvertently to the ease with which he was able to produce fabricated data" — to repay the $122,371 that NIH provided for the project whose results Darsee doctored.

The action came after an NIH-appointed panel of experts investigating Darsee's work at Harvard found a pattern of data fabrication. In addition to the falsified data in the NIH-supported project, the investigators found "statistical aberrations" in five papers that Darsee published while at Harvard which "cast doubts upon the primary data". These papers have since been retracted by Dr Eugene Braunwald, the chairman of Harvard's department of medicine.

Although Darsee will have 30 days to appeal against the decision to the Secretary of Health and Human Services, he has already acknowledged, in a letter to the NIH staff, that the investigation had established the falsifications and his role. He claimed to have no recollection of falsifying any data.

Suspicions were first aroused about Darsee in May 1981, while he was working on a heart study in dogs. Several laboratory technicians observed Darsee labelling strip-chart tracings obtained during a single day "24 hours", "72 hours", "one week" and "two weeks". The next day, when Darsee presented these results to his supervisor, Dr Robert Kloner, he was confronted and admitted his guilt. Braunwald subsequently withdrew an offer of an assistant professorship at Harvard and asked Darsee to resign his NIH fellowship, which had been supporting him at Harvard since his arrival in July 1979. But Braunwald and Kloner decided not to inform NIH of the reason. They also allowed Darsee to continue work on the NIH-supported project that became the focus of the investigation.

Braunwald explained to NIH in December of last year that "what was known in May 1981 was that a promising researcher with a long history of achievement had committed and acknowleged a single act of misconduct . . . Dr Darsee insisted that this act was a single incident".

Suspicions turned to alarm in October 1981, when the preliminary results of the NIH-supported study were compiled. The results obtained by the Harvard group turned out to be inconsistent with results obtained by four other groups doing similar studies as part of the same project (known as AMPIM). Dr Kloner then decided to reveal the May incident. Kloner also discovered a serious difference between Darsee's results for this study obtained before the May incident and after, when he was more closely supervised.

The NIH investigation began in December 1981, and, in a report completed last summer (but only made public last week), confirmed that Darsee had fabricated the AMPIM results and earlier results as well. Within the past three months, evidence from Emory University, where Darsee worked before coming to Harvard, has called into question more of Darsee's publications. According to Braunwald, who has contacted Emory's internal investigation, co-authors of abstracts submitted while Darsee was at Emory may not even have been aware that Darsee was listing them as such. "The integrity of six published papers, three of which involved experimentation with human subjects, is in question, as are a large number of published abstracts", Braunwald stated in a December 1982 memorandum to NIH on the Emory investigation.

The NIH investigation recommended that although supervision at the Cardiac Research Laboratory has been tightened up, NIH should inspect the laboratory to ensure that procedures to prevent a repetition of the problem are adequate. Braunwald and Kloner fought unsuccessfully, against NIH's adopting this recommendation.

But the investigators noted that part of the blame lies with the way research is done in the modern research laboratory: "A hurried pace and emphasis on productivity, coupled with limited interaction with senior scientists, has contributed to the disappointing events." **Stephen Budiansky**

Weapons research

Stanford jibs at military contact

Washington

A PROPOSAL to use Stanford's Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory for a weapons-related research project has met widespread opposition from the faculty and staff of the adjacent Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC).

Nearly half of SLAC's faculty last month signed a letter opposing the project, which was proposed by Livermore, Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories along with the University of California. Part of the project would involve the use of synchrotron X rays to calibrate X-ray detectors used in weapons tests.

"We've never had any weapons-related research here", said Dr George Loew, one of the 15 signatories of the letter, which was sent to Stanford University's Committee on Research. "It's a departure from the main mission of the laboratory. We asked whether the university could develop some policy so this work and any future work of the same nature wouldn't be done."

Although Stanford has a strict policy forbidding classified research on campus, it has no policy on unclassified but military-related research. The Livermore project would be completely unclassified, and only a portion would involve weapons applications. As submitted to Stanford, the proposal calls for construction of a new beam line to be shared equally between the weapons laboratories and the University of California researchers. None of the University of California researchers would be involved in the weapons-related research. The Department of Energy's office of military applications has been asked to provide $5.2 million; the University of California investigators would provide about $1 million.

The proposal faces several hurdles, however, and seems a long way from approval. It is being considered by the synchrotron laboratory's proposal review panel, a group of outside experts that examines all proposals for their scientific merit. The panel has asked the Livermore group for more details.

If the review panel clears the project, it would still need the approval of the synchrotron laboratory's director, Professor Arthur Bienenstock. The synchrotron laboratory is administratively separate from SLAC, but uses electrons produced by the accelerator.

A third hurdle is a Stanford requirement that outside projects should have a Stanford principal investigator. "It's possible nobody [at Stanford] wants to be associated with that work", Loew said.

Lloyd Multhauf of Livermore said that the project is "primarily basic research", and that "only a small portion of the proposal" involves the X-ray detector calibration. He also said that "the military side of the Department of Energy has funded a lot of basic science". Multhauf said that the national laboratories were also looking into the possibility of carrying out part of the project at Brookhaven National Laboratory's synchrotron source.

Loew said that he and other opponents to this project are not objecting to weapons research *per se*, but they believe that a university campus is not the place for it.

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