

Illmensee inquiry

Fraud charge unproven, researcher resumes duties

THE commission set up by the University of Geneva to investigate allegations of fraud against a leading embryologist, Professor Karl Illmensee, has concluded that there is no compelling evidence that he fabricated his data. But in a report that is highly critical of Illmensee's experimental records, the six members of the commission are unable to reach agreement on whether "the hypothesis that the protocols were fabricated could be upheld"; some felt it could, others considered "there was no compelling evidence to support or refute the hypothesis". Releasing the full report last week, the university blandly stated that Professor Illmensee is resuming all his duties in the faculty.

The commission had been considering since last August allegations made against Illmensee by three members of his laboratory. The allegations centre on a series of experiments that Illmensee carried out in Geneva between April and August 1982. Growing suspicious of their professor, three members of the laboratory compiled evidence of fraud until, after a talk by Illmensee in January 1983, Dr Kurt Bürki publicly stated that he and his colleagues could not accept the results. An internal investigation of their accusations culminated in what some took to be an admission of fraud by Illmensee (who has since consistently denied it). The rector of the university then publicly announced that the affair would be investigated by a commission which included Dr Anne McLaren of University College London, Professor Pierre Chambon of the University of Strasbourg and professor Richard Gardner of the University of Oxford.

Their report concentrates on three matters — Illmensee's apparent admission of fraud, the numerous errors, discrepancies and corrections discovered in his experimental protocols and errors in a grant application he submitted to the US National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Illmensee's admission amounted to a signed statement that "Protocols of experiments of Dr Karl Illmensee have been manipulated in a way which is contrary to scientific ethics in some period of 1982". It was countersigned by three members of the faculty of sciences of the University of Geneva and dated 17 May 1983. But what exactly did it mean? The faculty members, in a letter that accompanied the statement when it was sent to the dean, said that "Illmensee clearly recognized having falsified ("faked") protocols. . .", a view which they subsequently maintained under questioning by the commission. Professor Illmensee, however, maintained throughout the commission's enquiries and last

week that he had admitted only errors in writing up his protocols, not falsification.

Speaking from Geneva, Illmensee said he was so shocked at the accusations made at his meeting with the faculty members that he could not defend himself properly and allowed words to be put in his mouth. Faced with contradictory statements, the commission was finally unable to decide whether Illmensee "did or did not recognize by his signature that experiments were falsified".

It was the day after he signed the admission that Illmensee wrote to NIH withdrawing a sentence, concerned with a particular chimaeric mouse, from his grant application. Faced with contrary evidence, Illmensee acknowledged that the mouse could not be the product of the experiments he had claimed it to be in the application. Subsequently he corrected his "slip" but with a claim that has since become as doubtful as the first. The report concludes: "At the present time, the Commission, as well as Professor Illmensee, do not know which mouse, if any, was the chimaeric male referred to in the NIH grant application." Last week Illmensee disagreed, saying that the words "of two" should replace "if any" since somebody other than himself must have mistakenly mixed up two animals.

As to the accumulation of errors, corrections and discrepancies in his records which, according to the report, "are such as to throw grave doubt on the validity of the conclusions" of the series of experiments, Illmensee admits that his recording system was too prone to error and says that a contributory factor was the stress caused by his impending move to new buildings. He emphasized the report's conclusion that the errors and discrepancies discovered do not bias the results claimed.

Responding to criticism by the commission of his secretive way of working and failure to share techniques with his colleagues, Illmensee said this was exaggerated. He had shared each part of the technique with some colleagues although not every step could be carried out by anyone in his laboratory and certainly not with the level of success he could achieve. The techniques are highly skilled and "it takes Ashkenazy to play Rachmininov properly" said Illmensee.

The report does not reserve its criticism for Illmensee. It is also critical of the university for not making Dr Bürki's written accusations available to Illmensee for several months even though they had been given to other members of the university staff. Moreover, it criticizes those members of the university who felt

concerned about the case for not analysing the Bürki report in sufficient detail before drawing their conclusions and not discussing it with Illmensee.

As for Dr Bürki and the two other accusers, the commission acknowledges their sincerity but is mildly critical "of their failure rigorously to assess their evidence" and for their lack of "on-the-spot documentation to support their accusations", because lack of such documentation complicated the commission's task.

Professor Illmensee expressed satisfaction with the way the commission worked (he was allowed to attend all hearings with his lawyer) and with the result. He will now have to reconstruct his laboratory — the accusers and their sympathizers will be leaving — and attempt to repeat the dubious experiments as a collaborative project with full scientific rigour, as suggested by the commission. So far he has no definite plans for that and also has to await the reaction of NIH to his grant application and the Swiss National Fund's decision on a grant that was blocked half way through its 3-year term, pending the outcome of the commission.

Dr Bürki, who did not receive a copy of the report in advance of its publication, said last week that he accepts the report as it is and was glad that the scientific community would be able to read it for themselves. (More than 700 pages of transcripts from the commission's hearings are also open to anyone who wishes to travel to Geneva.)

Peter Newmark

Orlov appeal

Dr Yuri Orlov, the Russian physicist and human rights campaigner, who completed a seven year prison-camp sentence on 10 February (see *Nature* 16 February, p.585), is to serve the second part of his sentence, five years' internal exile, in the Yakut Autonomous Republic, one of the bleakest areas in Siberia.

The decision to send Dr Orlov to Yakutia was taken on 6 February — three days before the death of Mr Andropov. Mr John Macdonald, the London lawyer who has been a noted campaigner for Dr Orlov's release, has therefore made a new appeal to Mr Chernenko "to make a gesture towards the scientific community throughout the world and release Orlov".

To show Dr Orlov that his colleagues abroad have not forgotten him, the members of the "Orlov Committee" at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) this week applied for a visa for one of their number to visit Orlov in exile, although they realize that the chances of obtaining it are small. More practically, they are organizing their colleagues to send greetings cards and scientific journals to Orlov. The following address should be sufficient: Dr Orlov, Yu. F. Yakutskaya ASSR, Leninskii Raion, Poselok Nurbachan, USSR. Vera Rich