

# Give the hunger-striker a break

**Hunger-striking is not an honourable way of influencing events, but an expression of frustration. Walter Stewart has given up his fast. His employers (the NIH) might better now be able to be conciliatory.**

**Bethesda.** Walter Stewart, the scourge of data-falsifiers everywhere, broke his 33-day fast last Friday evening. The following morning, it was evident that he had lost weight (a pound a day, he says), but his characteristic conversational style had not changed: he speaks as if there were only exclamation marks for punctuation, and has done so for at least the past quarter of a century.

Stewart was sitting on a couch in the living-room of Dr Ned Feder, his partner and fellow employee of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), assigned to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases until their reassignment as from 10 May. Feder had earlier explained that the routine has been the same for the past month; Stewart's wife Nancy would drop him off each morning at 8.30 and "we would work together until 6 p.m. or so". Technically, both were on vacation last week.

"Just what you would expect of them", their critics say. "They blow their vacation allowance on a foolish hunger strike, milking the event for the publicity it will bring them." But that is not the case. For what it is worth, there has not been much publicity; even their friends have been a little embarrassed, not having many hunger-strikers among their acquaintance. But camping out in Feder's living-room is also a kind of deprivation, cutting them off from the ample communications at NIH. Feder explains apologetically that "Eva [his wife] wasn't too pleased, but we've filled the place up with fax machines and photocopiers". No complaint about the vacation time, it seems.

Feder's greeting at the door had been a little formal: "You'll be glad to know that Walter gave up his fast last night, after careful deliberation." There had been telephone conversations earlier, but no suggestion that Stewart was anything but implacable. So why did he give up? Because, they both said (but especially Stewart) that they believed they would establish the point they wished to make with NIH. Stewart says that eleven senators support their case. He imagines that there will be some kind of investigation, and that they will be able to continue with their studies of the scientific literature.

What is their case? It is best described anecdotally. I first met Stewart in 1970, when *Nature* set up an office in Washington and when Feder, an earlier friend, recommended Stewart as a referee for "difficult" papers. Stewart was then fresh from a junior fellowship at Harvard, where he and Feder

(who had been at the medical school) had struck up a friendship. So Stewart came to talk, and seemed interested in the tale of a paper about a material called "scotophobin"; an extract of the brain of a rat which, when injected into the skull of another rat, would transfer to the second the learned skills of the first.

The experiments had been described in great detail. Learning consisted of being taught to run a maze, so that there were statistical problems in telling how the second rat (with scotophobin) differed from the first and from naive animals. But there were also problems in peptide chemistry, to do with the purification of the material. Preliminary accounts of the work had already appeared elsewhere, giving it an air of verisimilitude. But Stewart said without hesitation, "It cannot be true", and he laughed aloud. He promised to send a referee's report, which turned out to be as long as, and much more scholarly than, the original paper. We published both, since when nothing much has been heard of scotophobin.

It is not easy to understand why people like Stewart are so captivated by the bogus. Feder, whose behaviour is the more correct, is easier to place as a conventionally morally upright person, to whom deception (especially in science) gives deep offence. Stewart rather marvels at it, like a person seeing a card-trick for the first time, and in the spirit of "aren't those devils even cleverer than we thought?"

Stewart's next brush with *Nature* began early in the 1980s, when he and Feder sent in a manuscript purporting to describe the motives of the coauthors of John C. Darsee, then known to have concocted data both at Emory University and at Harvard. The objective was to show that the coauthors "knew or should have known" that Darsee was a fraud; the attorneys of three of them certainly read the manuscript in that sense. In the endless iterations of the text, on one memorable Friday afternoon, Stewart called to say that they were withdrawing the manuscript on the basis of the first few pages of an edited version still feeding through the fax machine in London. But when eventually a text was published, it did a public service: people think twice, now, about letting their names be added to manuscripts they have not read.

Jointly, Feder and Stewart have maddened the scientific community by what seems to be their arrogance. But, in reality, they have been most often right in their assertions, which are usually narrowly drawn,

and based only on meticulous analysis. But their most recent venture, the notorious "plagiarism machine", software designed to count common sequences in files representing the published literature, is mistaken. The theft of other people's ideas is a greater offence in science than the copying out of mere text.

While nobody has said as much, their public brush earlier this year with the Civil War historian Stephen Oates seems to have been the trigger for their reassignment, Stewart to the Laboratory of Chemical Physics, Feder to the extramural grants division of their institute. It seems not to be widely appreciated that, until then, their duties included the study of "professional practices among scientists, professional misconduct and the accuracy of the scientific literature". Both men, as it happens, were given ratings of "excellent" at their routine performance assessments in the summer of last year.

What will happen now? Still recovering last weekend from his fast, Stewart seemed most of all offended that neither he nor Feder will be allowed to attend the symposium on plagiarism and its machine detection organized by NIH and the American Association for the Advancement of Science for 21–22 June. Their plagiarism program, already used elsewhere, will be described by others. The NIH evidently believes it is a broad church, within which it has hitherto accommodated ingenious Feder and Stewart. Why not carry on a little longer?

Evidently there is a practical problem. Feder and Stewart make waves which, when spurious, are more than an annoyance. But there are practical solutions that might be explored. Why not, for example, see what kind of steering committee they would live with happily and respectfully? NIH might be surprised. Or hammer out some rules that ensure that findings of misconduct reach the public eye in a seemly fashion?

The case for Feder and Stewart and the continuation of their work is that there is a great deal to be learned about the literature by the detailed study of particular aberrations, not only where people have misled others but where they have been misled themselves. The frailties of the literature are mostly accidental, not the consequences of fraud, but they need to be better understood. Feder and Stewart have made a substantial contribution already to the understanding of what makes a reliable text. It will be a misfortune if they cannot continue.

**John Maddox**