

## Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

SIR — Having attended the Conference on Plagiarism conducted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH)'s Office of Research Integrity (ORI), which was reviewed by John Maddox (*Nature* 376, 721; 1995), I can confirm that Charles W. McCutchen (*Nature* 377, 282; 1995) conveys quite well the flavour — and especially the scepticism — expressed by several in the audience about the integrity of ORI itself.

I too can attest to the presence of police — who were armed, to boot — and tampering with the transcript by ORI. Dr Ned Feder commented publicly on the presence of the police, adding that it was unheard of for armed guards to patrol the corridors of scientific meetings held at the NIH. Yet the transcript does not include Feder's remarks.

In an exchange between Dr M. Maureen Polsby, a former employee of NIH, and Dr Alan Price of ORI, Polsby rebuked ORI at length for its treatment of her complaint against NIH of sexual harassment and plagiarism. Her remarks and the response thereto were struck from the record.

Only one of my two comments was included in the transcript (without identifying me), the more damning of the two (where I took ORI to task for notifying the public only through announcements in the *Federal Register*) having been struck from the record.

Tampering with transcripts seems to be endemic with ORI. Affected participants in Federal Advisory Committee meetings of the Commission on Research Integrity, a sequel to the Conference on Plagiarism, have commented on excisions from transcripts of the meetings.

I suggest that there should be a congressional hearing on the operation of ORI.

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SIR — In a recent leading article about a conference on theft of ideas<sup>1</sup>, John Maddox denounced plagiarism as “the worst of bad behaviour”<sup>2</sup>. But is he too a purveyor of purloined goods? Among his other comments is this one: “The record of the meeting . . . clearly brings out the evident difference between scientists' and lawyers' conceptions of what constitutes plagiarism. To lawyers, the crime is akin to copyright violation, to scientists it is more like the commercial crime of ‘passing off’, which a manufacturer may seek to claim a distinguished brand name for inferior goods.”

That analogy happens to be one I had drawn at a 1988 conference organized by

the Council of Biology Editors, during a session in which Maddox and I appeared on the same panel. My remark (as later formalized in the conference proceedings) was that: “adding the names of scientists to research for which they have no responsibility is false labelling: It misleads the consumer by promising a level of quality associated with a respected source”<sup>3</sup>.

Clearly Maddox did not use my words, but he does seem to have lifted my idea. In the process, however, he made two errors. First, I was referring not to plagiarism (putting one's own name on another's work) but to a type of ‘gift authorship’ (putting another's name on one's own work, to enhance its credibility). So Maddox had it backwards.

Second, Maddox attributed the “false labelling” view to scientists, apparently in the belief that they, not lawyers, understand the true nature of plagiarism. Although I have had some experience doing scientific research, I am now (and was in 1988) practising law. Perhaps I should be flattered that Maddox associates my ideas with the insights of scientists. I suspect that, in fact, he does not remember the origin of the analogy. (In cognitive science, this is called source amnesia; in journalism, as in research ethics, it's honest error.)

Still, we are left to brood (Maddox's word): is it plagiarism if someone steals your idea, but gets it all wrong?

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1. ORI/AAAS Conference on Plagiarism and Theft of Ideas, 21–22, 1993.
2. Maddox, J. *Nature* 376, 721 (1995).
3. Mishkin, B. in *Ethics and Policy in Scientific Publication* (eds Bailer et al.) 229 (Council of Biology Editors, 1990).

■ Mishkin raises a problem in modern etiquette. If you set out to persuade some of those who listen to you of a point of view, are those whom you persuade all plagiarists? And are the others the only honest people? I cannot recall her intervention in 1988 (no doubt a proof of “source amnesia”), but surely she should be glad, rather than irritated, that one member of her audience grasped (albeit incorrectly) the nub of what she said? — John Maddox, Editor, *Nature*. □

## Soros funds

SIR — The Soros scholarships to which you refer in a recent leading article (*Nature* 375, 264; 1995) exert a negative influence on the Russian educational system, despite George Soros's intentions. The selection of candidates for scholarships is made by elderly academics, so most scholarships have been awarded to

law-abiding lecturers in their declining years, who are unable to take account of modern scientific advances. What they teach their students was modern about 50 or so years ago. Receiving such a scholarship ensures the academic position of such people, and as a result the quality of teaching deteriorates.

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## Life assurance

SIR — In your report of a planned meeting between the Royal Society and the Institute of Actuaries (*Nature* 377, 375–376; 1995), it is stated that discussion will consider “how genetic analysis could be used to identify potential morbidity and mortality in groups of individuals”. The life insurance premiums for such people can then be loaded to reflect the insurer's greater risk.

What if the analysis indicates exceptional longevity or resistance to certain diseases? Will the premiums then be concomitantly reduced? The insurers are strangely reticent on such a benign outcome.

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## Price of stardom

SIR — I was amused by the eye-catching advertisement for Stratagene's Pfu DNA polymerase (for example *Nature* 12 October 1995, xii) featuring the Nobel prizewinner Kary Mullis. In the superposition photograph, Mullis changes from black to white lab coats — meant to indicate the mutating behaviour of Taq polymerase (sold by Perkin-Elmer) but liable to be misinterpreted as a ‘turncoat’ metaphor for promotion of Pfu at the expense of his former employer's product.

I wonder if this advertisement signals a new age in science commercialism in which scientist superstars will augment their modest incomes through advertising hooks much like vastly better paid (and more famous) star athletes? Unlike Charles Darwin and Gerhardus Mercator, whose names have been appropriated by two young biotechnology companies, Mullis (assuming he was paid) is cashing in on stardom in his own lifetime.

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