

Troubled plant-biology group faces new inquiry

Team of leading biologist Olivier Voinnet chalks up eighth retraction.

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14 October 2016



Olivier Voinnet.

Frederic Maigrot/REA

Following a high-profile retraction, Swiss and French research institutions have confirmed that they are jointly conducting a new inquiry into work from the troubled group of leading plant biologist Olivier Voinnet. Voinnet himself is not at the centre of the latest inquiry, however.

Voinnet is renowned for his research on how RNA interference allows plants, invertebrates and mammals to combat viruses. But last year, the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH Zurich) [found, in separate reports, that images had been manipulated in some of his group's papers](#). The CNRS, where Voinnet is a senior, tenured scientist, suspended him for two years, but he has been on secondment to ETH Zurich since 2010, so the suspension will take effect only if he returns to work in France.

Since mid-2015, seven papers authored by Voinnet and his colleagues have been retracted, and many more corrected. Now, the researchers have notched up an eighth retraction, [issued by Science](#) on 13 October. The paper in question is one of several that are the subject of a new joint inquiry by the CNRS and ETH Zurich, says Vanessa Bleich, a spokesperson for ETH Zurich. The two organizations had [announced](#) the bare bones of that inquiry on 8 September, but stated at the time only that it was prompted by "serious doubt" that had emerged "over the past few weeks" about figures in "several molecular biology publications"; CNRS will take the lead in the inquiry, the statement added.

Bleich says Voinnet is not at the centre of the inquiry, although he is a co-author of some of the papers under investigation. (A Swiss newspaper, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, had also reported Voinnet's connection to the inquiry in September).

Figure irregularities

The latest retraction notice relates to a 2010 paper that had already received two corrections and an erratum. It says that Voinnet had "recently informed" *Science* that the erratum "does not address all figure irregularities in the paper and that these irregularities are, in fact, extensive and inappropriate image duplications and manipulations that cannot be considered the result of mistakes".

Voinnet told *Nature's* news team that he would like to discuss the situation but was not allowed to comment on the retraction until the inquiry was complete. He said that he drew the issue to *Science's* attention after an anonymous poster pointed in July on the PubPeer website to further problems with the group's paper.

The notice adds that all the paper's authors agreed that it should be retracted, except for one co-author, Patrice Dunoyer, who had not responded to *Science's* communications by the time the journal's retraction went to press. But the journal appended an editor's note, saying that he got in touch afterwards to approve the retraction. (Before either the retraction or editor's note appeared, *Nature's* news team had asked Dunoyer why he hadn't responded: he said he had been on sick leave.) Dunoyer, who works on RNA biology at the CNRS's Institute of Molecular and Cellular Biology, says that he is also unable to comment while the joint inquiry is ongoing.

The same *Science* paper had already been investigated by ETH Zurich during its earlier inquiry. But in last year's report, the institution recommended that the paper only be corrected, not retracted — on the grounds that the raw data and documentation of the experiments substantiated its scientific conclusions. Bleich declined to comment on why the earlier inquiry didn't flag up the latest issues.

Little more is known about the terms of the new inquiry. In their September statement, the CNRS and ETH Zurich noted that the names of the experts on the inquiry commission were being withheld at this stage, "to guarantee that the inquiry is conducted serenely". Once completed, the results of the inquiry will be made public, as will any disciplinary measures, they added.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2016.20807