

had contact has ever encountered such a blatant example of malpractice before.

If the above instances of technical oversight were indeed down to administrative errors within your office that does not say much for the efficiency and competence of you and your staff. If they were down to a deliberate and predetermined strategy to destroy the academic reputation of Ermakova—and that is indeed my interpretation—your continuing position as editor would become untenable.

**Brian John**

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1. Quist, D. & Chapela, I.H. *Nature* **414**, 541–543 (2001).
2. Quist, D. & Chapela, I.H. *Nature* **416**, 602 (2002).
3. [http://www.alumni.berkeley.edu/Alumni/Cal\\_Monthly/June\\_2002/Food\\_fight.asp](http://www.alumni.berkeley.edu/Alumni/Cal_Monthly/June_2002/Food_fight.asp)
4. Cleveland, D.A., Soleri, D., Aragón Cuevas, F., Crossa, J. & Gepts, P. *Environ. Biosafety Res.* **4**, 197–208 (2005).

#### To the editor:

We are writing on behalf of the Institute of Science in Society (London) to express our deep concern over your September Feature about Irina Ermakova and her work. The article is grossly unfair to Ermakova and certainly not in the best traditions of scientific publishing.

There are journals that routinely publish criticisms of papers along with the papers themselves. This can be an effective way of drawing attention to important but possibly controversial work, while not allowing it to go unchallenged. These journals generally adhere to some important rules. The target paper is written by the researcher(s); not by a journalist/professional editor. Comments from other scientists are published along with the paper, followed by a general reply by the author(s). Some of the commentators may be known to be critical of, or even hostile to the author's point of view, but the panel will include others who are not. That is quite different from what you have done.

You were wrong not to make it clear to Ermakova how you proposed to use her contribution, even to the extent of not showing her the proofs of what would actually appear in your journal. Such practice is more appropriate for a tabloid newspaper than for a serious scientific journal, and a public acknowledgement of the oversight from you is in order.

**Mae-Wan Ho & Peter T Saunders**

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#### To the editor:

I was very disappointed by your September Feature critiquing the results of Irina Ermakova, especially as I had previously considered *Nature Biotechnology* one of the best scientific journals in the area of biotechnology.

I feel that publishing selected extracts of Ermakova's results and experimental methods was inappropriate. These results should have been published as a full paper with a detailed description of the methods.

Presenting the work in this manner would have allowed everybody in the scientific world to assess Ermakova's methodologies and results. Indeed, the author herself feels that her data set does not give all answers and, due to limited resources, was constrained in what she could do. After publication of her paper, comments could have been invited from the scientific community, which could also have been published by the journal.

Publishing edited extracts of her work together with comments of scientists who are well known to uncritically reject even the notion that there may be risks associated with GM crops gives me the strong impression that your journal is politically motivated to (i) defend the dogma that there are no potential health risks associated with GM crops, (ii) destroy the reputation of scientists that dare to challenge that dogma and (iii) prevent such scientists from gaining the resources to continue their work on risks of GM crops and how to avoid them.

There are many analogies to the treatment that Arpad Pusztai received after he reported negative effects of GM crops on rats. His work was criticized without him being given a chance to defend himself or publish his work until much later. Also, he has until this date not been given the opportunity to repeat and/or continue his work and no one else was commissioned to repeat it either.

Your treatment of Irina Ermakova will confirm the views of many in civil society in the following two respects: first, you reinforce the idea that the scientific community as a whole is dogmatic rather than objective when it comes to GM crops; and second, that the scientific establishment tries to suppress data and rubbish scientists when they report data indicating risks associated with GM crops, rather than applying the 'precautionary principle' and doing further research to investigate the mechanisms underlying such phenomena.

I feel that the most honorable way forward for *Nature Biotechnology* would be to invite Ermakova to submit her results as

a full paper to the journal, for the journal to select 'non-dogmatic reviewers' for the paper, and for the paper to then undergo the normal peer-review process. If the paper were rejected, Ermakova could be given clear indications as to why and how the issues criticized should be addressed. If she were unable to address the criticisms and do the extra experimental work as a result of the difficulty of getting hold of the materials (e.g., GM and near isogenic non-GM lines) because biotech companies refuse to supply her with them, then this could also be published by *Nature Biotechnology*.

Arpad Pusztai was never allowed to repeat and do supplementary studies to address the criticisms of his work (and other laboratories were also not given the chance to repeat his work due to GM-crop materials and other resources not being made available). It would be a great shame if this were to happen again, particularly if one of the most respected scientific journals was implicated in suppressing such work.

**Carlo Leifert**

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#### To the editor:

We write specifically about the process *Nature Biotechnology* underwent before publishing the September Feature on the work of Irina Ermakova. We are not writing at this time to debate the science discussed either by Ermakova or Bruce Chassy, Val Giddings, Alan McHughen and Vivian Moses. Instead, we are of the opinion that Ermakova should have been given a venue to present her data in full so that proper assessment could be made by the community. This would have avoided the obvious qualifiers made by the commentators because they did not have enough information at times. This kind of qualifier is annoying when normally it could have been raised during the peer-review process and corrected by the time the article went to print.

We would like to raise four specific points of concern about the editorial process for this article.

First, was the readership properly informed about the reasons you sought to publish Ermakova's results? In the feature, the editor seems to imply that *Nature Biotechnology* solicited comments