

Reply to 'Your cheatin' heart'

To the editor:

I'm writing to clarify a few points raised in 'Your cheatin' heart' (*Nat. Med.* **12**, 490; 2006). In particular, the comment attributed to me, "Graduate students would do anything to please their principal investigator" needs explanation.

To suggest that a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow would do anything to please their principal investigator indicates a willingness to engage in unethical, illegal or immoral conduct. I personally do not know of any graduate student or postdoctoral fellow who would take such an approach to pursuing recognition or advancement in science.

Vanderbilt University requires that all researchers participate in an intensive program known as "Responsible Conduct in Research"

and stresses strict adherence to standards and policies that define responsible conduct. In my experience, graduate students adhere to professional ethics even while they grapple with doubts about their ability to complete the doctoral program and be competitive enough to succeed in science. These students seek to honor ethical principles while driven to publish papers in order to achieve acceptance into an outstanding postdoctoral position and launch their careers.

This does not imply that there are no exceptions. Graduate students and postdocs certainly do experience pressure and stress in their pursuits of a career in science. With the gamut of pressures involved in making it as a respected scientist, there is, as in any human endeavor, temptation to engage in misconduct.

If researchers don't feel they are at the top, they conclude that no matter how much they love science, they can't succeed. There is therefore the persistent strong personal desire to please oneself and others, especially the mentor. But the great majority of graduate students and postdocs are committed to high ethical standards in their research and would not engage in misconduct to please an advisor, to realize a certain outcome in a trial, to get published or to get to the top.

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