RIKEN scientist arrested

A Japanese researcher, well known for his work on 'supramolecules', was arrested last week for allegedly misappropriating research funds. The scientist, Tatsuo Wada, is based at the Advanced Science Institute in Wako, part of Japan's network of research labs known as RIKEN.

The case is an embarrassment for RIKEN, which has an annual budget of ¥100 billion (US\$1 billion) and whose researchers are often looked at enviously for their generous funding. "We expect to get strong criticism for this," says Haruhiko Maekawa, director of RIKEN's general-affairs division. "We will have to show that our operations are sound." RIKEN president Ryoji Noyori says: "We will put in place thorough protective measures and redouble awareness of these matters throughout the institute so we can meet the public's expectations."

It is the first time in RIKEN's 92-year history that a researcher is alleged to have misappropriated research funds.

Wada is known for creating organic supramolecular systems — assemblies of organic molecules whose shape, size and orientation can be manipulated to convey information. He focuses on designing supramolecules that react to light in a way that would allow them to be used in sensors or solar cells. These 'soft optoelectronic' materials could replace semiconductors and other materials that are costly to process. He has also been working on supramolecules that could go into Japan's ubiquitous touch-and-go train passes.

An international review of Wada's work last year said he had "an original approach and the laboratory is to be highly commended for its accomplishments in this area". "He has made some very highly functional and original materials," says Hachiro Nakanishi, a materials scientist at Tohoku University in Sendai who was on the review committee.

But on 3 August, Wada called RIKEN's head of research affairs, Yoshiharu Doi, and apologized for "causing trouble for RIKEN through his transactions with the supplier". He gave no details, says Maekawa.

On 8 September, Tokyo's police department arrested Wada for allegedly transferring payments with RIKEN money of approximately ¥11 million on more than 20 fictitious orders. The orders were to

the account with Akiba Sangyo, a Tokyo-based company that distributes scientific equipment. The police also arrested Akiba Sangyo's president Etsuo Kato, on charges of breach of trust.

Both Wada and Kato are being detained. Neither could be reached for comment while in custody. A person who picked up the phone at Akiba Sangyo said that the company, which could not contact its president, was not prepared to make an official statement. A decision as to whether to proceed to trial is expected by 18 September.

As RIKEN waits for a full tally of the allegedly misappropriated money, it has started legal proceedings against Wada to recover the funds. It has also put together an eight-person committee, composed of a lawyer and accountant from outside the institute, two RIKEN scientists and four other RIKEN staff, to investigate. Maekawa says he expects to have a preliminary report within two months.

The timing is making RIKEN researchers nervous because the recently elected Democratic Party of Japan, which takes the reins this week, has already promised to pare down the "independent administrative institutions", of which RIKEN is one, in an attempt to cut down on corruption and waste. Three years ago, a misappropriation scandal at Waseda University in Tokyo put a funding programme there temporarily on ice (see *Nature* 442, 121; 2006).

Wada has been replaced as head of his group. Maekawa says it is unlikely that Wada will be able to retain his

position as a RIKEN scientist.

Nakanishi says that researchers in Japan suffer from overly strict rules about how grants are used and argues that they should be given more discretion as to how to use their funds. "The government talks on and on about internationalizing research, but if you try ... to invite a foreign researcher or take one out to eat, you can't use the funding," he says. "I've had to use my own money for such work-related expenses."

"But the numbers in this case go far beyond the kind of money I'm talking about," he adds.

Criminal proceedings against Wada and Kato could carry a jail term of 5 years or a ¥500,000 fine.

David Cyranoski

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