When a Mentor Becomes a Thief

By CHRIS WOOLSTON

Ann Green (not her real name) spent seven years on her doctoral project at an East Coast university. In her mind, she had made a major breakthrough, the kind of discovery that could establish a career.

When the results were finally published, she was missing from the list of authors. Her adviser -- who, according to Ms. Green, had very little input in the research -- had mysteriously risen to first author. Ms. Green's only appearance came in the acknowledgement section, where she was thanked for her "generous advice." Few people have ever worked so hard for a compliment.

Over a decade later, she is still burning. "It was totally outrageous," she says. "It wrecked my career. I went out into the world with no manuscripts behind me." In the meantime, she says, her adviser has been cited over and over for her research. According to Ms. Green, he has also used her data to secure $5-million in grants.

Routine Theft

Publications are the currency of science. And Ms. Green isn't the only one who feels shortchanged. Many graduate students and postdoctoral researchers believe that they have been denied rightful authorship, says Drummond Rennie, an adjunct professor of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco's Institute for Health Policy Studies and the West Coast editor of The Journal of the American Medical Association. While some of the cases are simple misunderstandings, many graduate students and postdoctoral researchers have every right to feel cheated, he says.

"I've talked to scores and scores of people who allege misconduct, and most of them are entirely right," Dr. Rennie says. "In some labs, it's routine to steal other people's work."

Far too often, the junior scientists are willing victims, Dr. Rennie says. "They know their adviser is stealing their work, but they think they need to stay and get a good recommendation," he says. "I tell them, 'If you work with a thief, you get what you deserve.'"

Making Noise

While most junior scientists accept academic theft as a way of life, a few decide to make noise. Ms. Green, for example, filed a complaint with her university and with the Office of Scientific Integrity, the forerunner of today's Office of Research Integrity (a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). The federal standards for scientific misconduct are narrow, so it came as no surprise that Ms. Green's mentor was found not guilty of fraud or plagiarism. However, the university forced him to resign over the incident, although he was able to do so without any black
marks on his record.

On February 14 of this year, another case of alleged misconduct made headlines. A New York court ruled that Cornell University could not be held liable for charges of plagiarism against one of its professors, David Levitsky. The plaintiff, Antonia Demas, claims that the professor repeatedly took credit for her work as a graduate student. Charges of fraud and breach of contract still stand against Mr. Levitsky.

Two Sides

Not every case is what it appears to be, Dr. Rennie says. In May 1995, a former graduate student, Pamela Berge, won a $1.5-million suit against her mentors at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. At first, it looked like a classic case of power-hungry scientists trampling over a vulnerable junior researcher. In reality, Dr. Rennie says, it was more like the other way around.

"I used this case as an example for students, until I read all of the evidence," he says. "It turned out to be nonsense. She walked into a project that had been going on for many years. Two years later, she said everything was hers." The verdict against the university was overturned in 1997, and the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear Ms. Berge's appeal. She continues to stand by the allegations in her lawsuit.

The basic nature of the student-teacher relationship leaves ample room for misunderstandings and hurt feelings, says Nicholas Steneck, a science historian at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and a consultant for the Office of Research Integrity. "People enter a lab with an idea rumbling around in their head, and their mentor tries to help them develop it," he says. "If things aren't made perfectly clear, they walk away thinking they discovered something, even though the faculty member had the same idea 10 years ago. That's when things can go amok."

Almost every dispute over authorship starts with a breakdown in communication, Mr. Steneck says. "The problem occurs in dysfunctional laboratories where people aren't comfortable talking to their mentors," he says.

Credit Where Credit Is Due

The solution, then, is clear: Everyone needs to start talking. Before a single beaker gets rinsed, the question of authorship has to be laid on the table, Dr. Rennie says. "Students have to establish who will get credit for their work before they even sign on," he says.

Once the real science begins, junior researchers should keep detailed notes of their research. "It's very difficult for a graduate student to document what's theirs and what's not," Mr. Steneck says. "But if you're very conscientious, there are ways to document your contribution."

Young scientists should also take the time to learn what it generally takes to become a first author on a paper. "Everybody concentrates on the order of authorship, but nobody knows what it really means," Dr. Rennie says.

Several top-tier medical journals, including JAMA, have cut through the confusion by providing a brief synopsis of every author's contribution. At a glance, readers can see who did the real heavy lifting. "If there ever is an authorship dispute, it's much easier to figure out," Dr. Rennie says.

Unless scientists start publishing anonymously, disputes aren't going to disappear. Mr. Steneck has some advice for junior scientists who feel like they've been ripped off. First and foremost, they need to get an objective outside opinion. If they still see misconduct, they should report it to their dean or the university's scientific-integrity committee.
Young scientists can call the Office of Research Integrity for consultation, but they shouldn't expect the agency to take up their case, says Chris Pascal, the ORI's director. His office handles cases involving falsification of data, fabrication, and plagiarism, but it doesn't tackle authorship feuds. "We don't get into those kinds of disputes," he says. "We could get hundreds of cases each year, and we don't have the manpower."

Even if they had unlimited resources, the ORI would be wise to stay away from such disputes, Dr. Rennie says. "It's like a civil war -- particularly vicious and bitter."

And, like all civil wars, both sides suffer in the end.

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