

Research Misconduct Case Oversight

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Volume 5, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087221ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087221ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Programmes de bioéthique, École de santé publique de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

2561-4665 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Anonymous (2022). Research Misconduct Case Oversight. *Canadian Journal of Bioethics / Revue canadienne de bioéthique*, 5(1), 163–164.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087221ar>

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LETTRE À L'ÉDITEUR / LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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Anonymous

Mots-clés

responsable de l'intégrité de la recherche, plaignant, accusé, université

Keywords

research integrity officer, complainant, accused, university

Disclaimer: The author requested anonymity because they do not want to disclose the identities of the complainant, accused, and university. The Editor of the CJB/RCB has seen the details of the allegations and encouraged the author to follow the appropriate administrative channels and national regulations. The current letter aims to shed light on failures with the current misconduct governance system at North American universities and proposes a modification to procedures to ensure that they are handled impartially and with due diligence.

INTRODUCTION

Most American and Canadian research universities have similar procedures for submission and adjudication of claims of research misconduct. The point person for handling cases is generally the Research Integrity Officer (RIO). If a case is submitted, there is naturally a sense of urgency. It is unlikely that someone would take the risk of a frivolous or ungrounded allegation; a false allegation that is not considered to be in good faith would itself be considered misconduct, e.g., see the British Medical Journal (BMJ) criteria (1). It takes a great deal of courage to bring forward research misconduct allegations because accusers reasonably fear retaliation even when peer-review procedures are kept confidential.

Universities normally require that the RIO rapidly perform a preliminary review to either dismiss the case or appoint a review committee to try the case. But since these cases are usually complicated, involving multidisciplinary expertise, as well as having potential conflicts of interest, giving the power to the RIO to unilaterally dismiss a case is arguably not in the best interests of the university. It would be better to get things right by doing a complete and impartial investigation.

CASE

I filed a scientific misconduct case against a faculty member at a North American university with absolute proof to support my allegations. In unilaterally dismissing my case, the RIO committed no less than ten fouls including the following: 1) Dismissing from their definition of misconduct two BMJ defined criteria; 2) Having no expertise in any of the three scientific disciplines involved in the case, failing to seek out expert assistance; and 3) Using deception no less than 5 times in their report to divert attention from the focused issues in the case, to other irrelevant items.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To avoid such problematic management of what are clearly very sensitive situations, I suggest that research misconduct cases could be better conducted as follows:

Step 1: Complainant files an unofficial draft with the RIO.

Step 2: The RIO reviews the document, then asks questions and/or makes recommendations to the complainant.

Step 3: The complainant reviews the feedback and (a) makes a formal submission; (b) goes back to Step 1; or (c) drops the case.

Step 4: If the official complaint is filed, the RIO tries the case according to institutional mandated procedures, and in conformity with regional and national guidelines. For example, such national standards are clearly defined in the US (2) and Canada (3).

To protect the identity of the complainant, the accused should not be informed about the case until it is officially filed.

CONCLUSION

Although research misconduct is relatively rare, it is also receiving increased public attention, especially when it leads to scandals. So, when allegations are made, it is vitally important to the reputations of not only the affected parties, but to the entire research community, that these cases be managed and resolved impartially and include experts in the involved fields of research. Universities, through their RIO and Integrity Offices, should be proactive in training their researchers in what constitutes responsible conduct of research and how to prevent research misconduct; this would help promote research that meets leading standards of scientific rigor and integrity amongst students and colleagues, and empower the academic community to better detect and prevent misbehavior or misconduct by their colleagues.

Reçu/Received: 05/02/2021

Remerciements

Nous remercions l'éditeur, le professeur Bryn Williams-Jones, pour ses suggestions qui ont permis d'améliorer considérablement le contenu.

Conflits d'intérêts

Aucun à déclarer

Publié/Published: 01/03/2022

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to the editor, Professor Bryn Williams-Jones, for his suggestions that substantially improved the content.

Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

Édition/Editors: Hazar Haidar & Bryn Williams-Jones

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