



Dear Labby,
I am an Associate Professor (pre-tenure) in a Department of Medicine but have a strong cell biology thrust in my research. To paraphrase that Broadway show, a funny thing happened on the way to...(tenure, I hope).

In a grant application I submitted to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) last year I inserted some text about the disease in which the work was situated taken off the website of a foundation that raises money and funds research in that disease. I figured the boilerplate text about the disease, its genetic basis, prevalence, lack of treatments etc., was as good as anything I could write. And, besides, it was not like I could say “as Banting once said about diabetes” and then give a reference. (My proposal wasn’t about diabetes—that’s just an analogy).

Well, a ton of bricks came down on me because a study section member noticed that this text was that foundation’s boilerplate language; then NIH ran my application through some software the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) uses, and, voila, suddenly I am accused of plagiarism. I have explained to my institution my innocence (like I didn’t make up preliminary data and stick it in the application), but they are asking questions about my overall “attentiveness to standards of scholarship.” Meanwhile, the disease I’m trying to cure in both my clinic and my research awaits a breakthrough.

I made a trivial mistake, way below the definition of misconduct, and am feeling under siege. I was venting about this the other day with a senior colleague, and he asked me if I get the *ASCB Newsletter*. I told him I don’t; I’m not a member. He said, “Well, try Dear Labby anyway.” So I have. Can you give me your perspective?

—Accused

Dear Accused,

Labby certainly will try to help you on this matter: answering your and other queries is the mission of this column. But stand prepared—you may not like the advice.

First, what you did was lazy—not a federal crime but copying text instead of writing it de novo lies far from the passionate core of creativity that defines our profession. Second, you were deceptive in not at least attributing this text, another violation of the code of our guild. Your example of Banting is not compelling because his views on diabetes (both before and after the discovery) are widely available in the literature and can be cited. Or, to use your disease example in another way, it would have been perfectly facile for you to have said, “I have always thought that Mary Tyler Moore’s statement about Type I diabetes for the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation says it better than we scientists can:....” or something like that. No reviewer would have thought less of your application if you had quoted, with attribution, the best statements about the disease your proposal addressed.

You are correct that this kind of nonattribution is far less a transgression, of course, than planting fraudulent data into a grant application. But it is a transgression nonetheless. The tone of your query is irritation, which doesn’t acknowledge your fault or lessons to be learned. So Labby’s advice is two-fold. First, try to calm down and think deeply about what led you to do this in the first place. Has cutting corners been a pattern for you? Has your department chair told you if you do not get a/this grant, you will not be brought up for tenure? Most innocently, did you really think this was OK to do? Second, rather than emotionally repelling the NIH and institutional inquiries, you might think of them as catalysts. Thus, using the catalyst metaphor, they cannot change where you end up on this issue, but they can hasten your arrival at a position. I hope it will be one of introspection and learning. There are many cases on record in which the curve from what you did to an act of NIH ORI-defined scientific misconduct had a dangerously low slope. ■

—Labby

Direct your questions to labby@ascb.org. Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.

