DEAR Labby

Dear Labby,
On more than one occasion, I have been unable to obtain published reagents (plasmids) from other labs. In some cases, the email request is never answered. In other cases, I get a response explaining why the reagent "won't work" or why I should try a different experiment. In the latter case, I have responded as to why I think the experiment will work, only to have the reagent never provided. This is very frustrating. In most cases, I know the scientist who runs the lab, and who is not responding, and I know that the lab is funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and publishing results in journals that stipulate that reagents be made available. These investigators are on study sections and editorial boards of many journals. Thus I fear that if I were to "rat" on them, I would receive "retribution," however subtle. Other labs provide reagents in a timely fashion. For reagents that are in high demand, there are services that assist in providing these materials to other labs. The labs that do not comply with requests seem to sit back and get their work done without contributing to the community of researchers. What does Labby recommend?

—Seeking Reagents

Dear Seeking,
Routine (i.e., email) requests for materials can sometimes be catalyzed by an actual follow-up phone call (an admittedly ancient method but one that can be surprisingly effective). This is because many investigators see these requests as email "noise," namely low-priority incursions in a busy day. (Translation: "Geez, I was just finishing revising my manuscript and dealing with the reviewers and editor when this annoying distraction came that I'll have to get someone in the lab to handle.") But these investigators do respond, eventually. In contrast, the responses you describe have been obdurate, indeed adversarial. Such behavior cannot be condoned.

Labby has informed more than one requestor that the reagent might not work as hoped, for various reasons, but has always sent it nonetheless. To so comment but then not send the reagent is obviously a diversionary tactic. (In Labby's experience, the requesting investigator had not read Labby's publication carefully enough to appreciate what a given reagent could vs. could not accomplish. This was certainly forgivable and Labby hoped that the advice offered was helpful, perhaps more than the shipment itself.) Your experience, on the other hand, demonstrates unmistakable stonewalling.

The best approach is to involve your technology transfer office. Its staff know, or can readily reach, their counterparts at the institution whose investigator is refusing to provide a published reagent. It is possible that the uncooperative investigator is subject to an institutional policy on sharing published reagents. Such a policy would complement (or legally even trump, as a condition of employment) that of the journal in which the paper describing the reagent was published. In any case, this approach puts the matter in the hands of institutional officials experienced in this matter. (Moreover, they typically enjoy a healthy interinstitutional camaraderie with their counterparts.) Another advantage of this approach is that it keeps the matter as far from you and the investigator as possible. It would also put the request under the provisions of an interinstitutional Materials Transfer Agreement. This is to the advantage of all parties and, despite a prevalent misperception, is not at all burdensome on either the provider or requester.

If such an approach doesn't result in success, then contacting the journal would be your best next step. Bear in mind that most journals frame their related policy around providing the requester with an opportunity to confirm the findings obtained with the reagent. Some authors try to weasel out of sharing reagents by claiming that the request goes beyond mere confirmation, i.e., that the material will be used to pursue new research directions. Frankly, this is almost always the case, but Labby and many journal editors regard such arguments by authors as specious. After all, most purposes to which such reagents are put would involve confirming their published properties (and woe to the recipient who fails to do so). A second reason the aforementioned argument by a resisting author falls short is that the stated journal policies do not explicitly prohibit new uses.

If you find it necessary to pursue the journal route, your concerns about the limits of confidentiality and possible reproach will be well founded, as unpleasant as that is. There is an investigator in Labby's research field who is a notorious reagent nonsharer. Everyone knows this, and it has profoundly marred this scientist's reputation and his hoped-for accolades. So there is some justice. Moreover, most study section members have hypersensitive antennae for foul play on the part of a panel member. Labby painfully witnessed this more than once during eight years of NIH study section service; in each case everyone at the table saw right through the behavior and defeated the contrarian

who was motivated by a nonscientific agenda. Still, you are right to be concerned, and Labby hopes that the suggested institutional approach will work before the matter must go to the journal.

A final point is that sometimes such initially uncooperative investigators "cave in" by sending the reagent with a demand for coauthorship. Such demands should be strenuously resisted as they are, absent a true and genuine collaboration, "COA" (Corrupt On Arrival). Moreover, such demands would conflict with the standards for authorship that most journals are (at last) now requiring.

There was a 1985 movie, "Desperately Seeking Susan," a quirky romantic comedy starring Madonna and Rosanna Arquette. Though you may not be desperate, Labby hopes that you will obtain your needed materials in a more linear path than that by which Susan was found. May you soon no longer be "Seeking." ■

—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.

LETTER to the Editor

To the Editor:

I really enjoy the Dear Labby column in the *ASCB Newsletter.* The May 2010 column, however, is especially of interest because it deals with the issue of plagiarism. I run a research program for students at a math and science high school. I would like ASCB's permission to copy this column for use by students in our core research course, our science courses, and my student research program. I can also see it potentially used in our Considerations in Ethics program. This column presents a wonderful real-life example for our students of what can happen when one does not act with academic integrity. ■

—Judith A. Scheppler, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Editor's reply: *The ASCB is pleased to provide such permission and gratified that the column is of greater use.* ■