



Careless Duality by PI Erodes Trust, Endangers Postdoc's Career

Dear Labby,

A serious publication issue has arisen for me. It has a copyright aspect, which is being handled by the publishers, but it also has a bearing on my relationship with the coauthor (the head of the lab in which I'm a postdoc). In brief, we were invited by a cell physiology journal to write a review article on our joint research on mechanisms that determine apical-basal cell polarity of intestinal epithelium. After review and some revision, it was published in November 2009.

Last fall, I was talking with a second-year medical student at our institution who was interested in joining our lab for a research internship this summer. As we chatted, she told me how much she had enjoyed my "chapter." I replied that we call these publications "reviews" (thinking that she had merely used the wrong terminology). What she said next stunned me: "No—it was in a book." She told me that she had seen a book in the library with a chapter by me and my lab head. I immediately went to the library to look at the book, and there was the chapter. What is more, it was identical, word for word, to the published review article!

Furious, I went to see my lab head. He explained that he was invited to write a chapter for the book and thought it was OK to use our published review because "the audiences of the two publications are different." I asked him how he could do that, even if it could be justified (which I don't think it can be), without consulting me, the coauthor. He said that he thought I'd be pleased to have a chapter in a medical book to complement my research publications. But he added that, in hindsight, he should have sought my permission. He also said that he had intended to put a footnote in the proofs of the book chapter, indicating that the chapter was reproduced from the published review article. (This assumes that the book publisher would have been comfortable with that altogether.) But he said that when the proofs arrived, he was "very busy and forgot."

While the dual publication issue is being addressed by the publishers, lab head, and our institutional officials, I am interested in Labby's advice for me: How I can make the best of this unfortunate situation regarding my reputation, career, and relationship with my lab head? That relationship has been severely tested, and I daresay eroded, by this matter.

—Duped into Duality

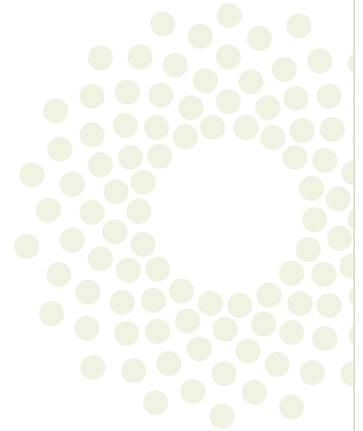
Dear Duped into Duality,

This was egregious misbehavior on the part of your lab head. The most immediate issue is to get your innocence on the record. Presumably the institutional officials handling this matter know that you had no knowledge of the book chapter being submitted. However, you should confirm that this fact is on the record, in writing.

Second, depending on what either publisher prints on this (a corrigendum, clarification, etc.), take all possible steps to ensure that such statements convey your innocence. It is possible that the journal will take legal action against the publisher of the book or your lab head—the latter's violation of copyright may have led to commercial profit. If the journal required transfer of copyright, was the form signed by both you and your lab head, or only by him on behalf of all authors? If the latter, you should ask him to give you a copy. In the case of the book, clearly he either signed such a form alone, or on behalf of all authors. If on behalf of all authors, the legal expectation underlying the form is that he did so with consent.

What now comes of your relationship with your lab head? A generous interpretation of his action would be that a very busy lab head forgot to tell a book publisher that a submitted chapter had been published elsewhere, verbatim. Busy people can forget all sorts of "little things." But in this case what your lab head forgot represented an ethical lapse. Presenting a pre-publication journal article as a new chapter is, in essence, a lie. To be truthful, your lab head should have requested your permission, obtained the journal and book publishers' permission (which probably would not have been provided), and given appropriate attribution. His failure to do this suggests that your lab head may not possess the "habit of truth," the central ethos of science. Further, to suppose that he was so busy when the proofs came that he forgot the footnote of attribution strains belief.

Frankly, Labby feels that based on what you have reported, your lab head cannot be trusted. One can only speculate on the range of his duplicity in other arenas. You will need to decide if his contrition is sufficient and the lapse uncommon. Ask yourself whether you can rebuild a reasonable working relationship. Or has it eroded to a degree that moving on to a different lab is the better option? In the latter case, you would want to seek counsel from the department chair or other



advisers on the completion of your work for publication. This will also ensure that other eyes are sentinels for possible retaliation, in any form. This is a danger that sometimes lurks in these cases. Should you decide to stay in the lab and complete your work, you must be alert to signs that the lapse was more than a one-time error in judgment. ■

—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.

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