



## Mentorship Gone Bad

Dear Labby,

I had always looked forward to defending my thesis and then moving on to a postdoc, both of which will be happening in the next few months. But a dark cloud has come over things and several people have suggested I write to you.

The lab in which I have done my thesis research works on mouse developmental biology. During my third year, while I was slugging away on another project (one that turned out OK and will be a chapter in my thesis), a postdoc in the lab discovered a gene involved in kidney morphogenesis. The postdoc and my PI wrote and published a paper and, meanwhile, with the encouragement of my advisor, I set off to look for other genes in this renal morphogenesis pathway. During this time the postdoc drilled down on the particular gene he had found to understand more about it. We were not, prior to this, a kidney lab, but in this field a found gene can redefine your tissue or organ of (sudden) interest. Over the next 18 months I discovered four other genes that play essential roles in differentiation of either the glomerulus or proximal tubules. The genetic design of both organ shape and function is especially revealed by these genes, and I am thrilled to have made these findings. Indeed, this work is the reason I have been offered a postdoc in one of the foremost labs in this field.

All seemed well until a year ago, when my lab head announced he was moving to another institution (and that one of the lab members who would be moving with him was the aforementioned postdoc). I was a bit concerned but my new project (the search for other genes) was already going extremely well, plus I had a very supportive thesis committee, including a leading expert in renal developmental biology and another working on polycystic kidney disease. But when I sent my advisor, now at his new institution, drafts of my thesis and manuscript he said, regarding the latter, that the postdoc would “of course be the second author.” I was dumbfounded (and further irritated by his term “of course”) because the postdoc had not done anything in my project, nor is one datum of his work in either my thesis or draft manuscript. When I challenged him, my advisor dug in his heels, saying the gene discovered by the postdoc had engendered my project. Labby, I had emphasized this to the hilt in the drafts of both my thesis and manuscript, referring to that work as having been “foundational.” Not to get technical, but my screen was designed in a different way. The postdoc’s finding was truly the reason I set forth to find additional genes, but I took a different experimental approach. So I feel strongly that my work was not collaborative with him, but nicely evolved from his. Granting him second authorship, which dilutes my impact, seems totally unwarranted.

Lately my advisor has started to rattle sabers. He has contacted our patent office to lay claim for the postdoc on my discovered genes (I actually don’t think genes should be patented) and also went so far as to contact the Dean to suggest that maybe I should be encouraged to wait another year to finish. My thesis committee members and another advisor I am lucky to have went absolutely ballistic.

My Mom and Dad and sister are coming to my graduation soon, an event I have always dreamed of. But this dispute with my advisor has taken some of the joy out of it. I should mention that he is not coming back to hand me my diploma on the stage, which saddens me. The good news is that my committee and others have been so wonderfully supportive, and have promised to help me as I move on. But as to the authorship dispute, they all said “Ask Labby.”

—Saddened at the End

Dear Saddened at the End,

It always pains me to hear such stories. You have presented yours with uncommon eloquence, and between the lines one surely senses your intrepid courage and scientific momentum.

The authorship dispute on the nascent manuscript can be taken directly to the Dean. It does not seem that the postdoc has any entitlement to coauthorship. As to invention rights and possible patent protection, U.S. patent law places enormous weight on non-obviousness and enablement. If the genes you have found, notwithstanding the other one the postdoc found, were not ones whose encoded proteins had been anticipated to be involved in kidney morphogenesis, or if any of them might have a persuasive degree of clinical relevance in the diagnosis or envisioned therapy of inherited (or even acquired) kidney disease, then this is something your institution should pursue. Patent applications that omit a demonstrable inventor are subject to disqualification or legal challenge by adversaries and, if a filing is contemplated, your institution will surely remind your advisor of this.

So go to your Dean, aided by your committee, and ask for a direct engagement with your mentor on the postdoc’s invalid authorship. Labby is encouraged by your description of all the support you are

getting. The term "mentor" in your query and this reply taxes the true definition. In Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, the "PI" entrusts a friend, named Mentos, to care for and educate his beloved child. The present meaning of the word has evolved, but its etymological root is worth remembering. (See page 17.) ■

—Labby

Direct your questions to [labby@ascb.org](mailto: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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