Resisting Intimidation

Dear Labby,

I’m a graduate student in the second year of my PhD in Virology. My research is going great, and I’m really happy with my choice of project and mentor. In fact, our lab just published a paper including work from my rotation project, and I was really pleased that my advisor included me as a co-author. But now I’m worried and concerned. You see, the work reported in the paper included experiments on cells derived from human fetal tissue. Of course, as we documented in the paper, the cells were from a source that had all the necessary consents and regulatory approvals. Shortly after the paper appeared on PubMed, I received an anonymous letter at home saying I shouldn’t be using human fetal tissue for research. The letter also included some pretty graphic literature. Several of my co-authors received similar letters, and we’re all a bit freaked out right now. I think the research we’re doing is really important and has amazing potential to help people, so I have no intention of giving up, but I could really use some advice on how to handle this situation.

—Poisoned by Pen

Dear Poisoned,

First, Labby hopes you have already spoken to your mentor and that you and the mentor have been in touch with the security and legal officials at your university. They will take steps to keep an eye on the lab and make sure there is no risk to you and your co-workers, or to your experiments.

Second, you should understand that such letterwriting campaigns are actually not uncommon. PubMed is publicly accessible, and it’s relatively easy for campaigners to search for papers describing work using human fetal tissue and then look up contact information for the authors—home addresses are not hard to find on the Internet. Campaigners may not bother sending letters to the senior author, choosing instead to target those, like yourself, who are early in their careers, in the hope that they can cut off the pipeline of talented students and postdocs. So, although this is very upsetting, the likelihood of it going any further is minimal.

Labby truly admires your determination to follow through with your research. Science often touches on areas that some people find morally difficult, and it’s essential that scientists are mindful of the ethical issues surrounding our work. But we should also stand up to those who try to bully us into giving up on important work with real potential benefits.

—Labby

Got Questions?

Labby has answers. ASCB’s popular columnist will select career-related questions for publication and thoughtful response in the *ASCB Newsletter*. Confidentiality guaranteed if requested. Write us at labby@ascb.org.