A Case of Sexual Harassment in the Lab

Dear Labby,

I have a sensitive issue: My friend told me today that she has had to fend off both verbal and physical sexual advances by a postdoc in her laboratory. We are both third-year graduate students in the same lab. Her project is a collaboration with the postdoc. Already they are preparing a significant paper on her work to which he has contributed an important experiment. They work in close proximity in the lab and this project is an important part of her thesis. And, though she has told him more than once to cease and desist, he continues to make lewd jokes in her presence and attempts to touch her arm or her cheek in conversations. He is a star to our PI, so my friend is reluctant to go to the PI for fear he will blow off her concerns. What shall I tell her to help her get out of a very uncomfortable and inappropriate situation?

—A Male Grad Student Worried for His Female Grad Student Friend

Dear Concerned Friend,

This situation is totally untenable and reprehensible. Without resolution, it will not only continue to intimidate your friend in many professional and personal ways, it will encourage the postdoc to feel free to do this to others. However, he does deserve due process just as your friend deserves to have her concerns taken very seriously.

The PI should be the first source of relief, and your friend should consider reporting what has happened to the PI, even if he thinks the postdoc is a scientific star. The PI then, as a mandatory reporter, would tell the Title IX Office on Campus. Title IX is part of a federal law and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs or activities operated by recipients of federal funds.1 Title IX offices are present on college campuses to ensure compliance.

If your friend is uncomfortable with reporting this to your PI, and you are comfortable with him, you could go to the PI and relay what you have heard—that there might be sexual harassment happening in the lab—and give him the specifics. Again, the PI is required to report this to the Title IX Office on your campus for confidential investigation.

Alternatively, your friend could go directly to the Title IX Office, and the investigation would still begin with fact finding. The investigation would remain confidential to protect both the accuser and the accused, until the situation is resolved. Your friend is entitled to know the final resolution. The postdoc’s behavior goes beyond sexual and gender harassment and into “creating a hostile work environment,” also subject to mandatory resolution. Labby applauds you for helping your friend through this situation. Appropriate handling of the matter will help the postdoc realize that such behaviors are not acceptable, are punishable, and are a detriment to his career. Labby hopes that will be enough to make him aware that he needs to treat all with whom he works with respect.

—Labby

Reference

1Purdue University: http://bit.ly/1UX3VMM

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