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CORRESPONDENCE

Fraud in science

Sir,—It is a sad fact of life that scientific fraud continues. Mr Larry Altman and Mr Laurie Melcher draw attention to some interesting aspects of the subject, not least of which is how extensive it is (25 June, p 2003).

Since my article on the subject appeared in the BMJ, I have noticed a number of new examples. Apart from those mentioned by Mr Altman and Mr Melcher, the following have come to light. Dr Wilbert Aranow has admitted “irregularities” in the tests of prazosin as a treatment for congestive heart failure that he performed for the Food and Drug Administration. His data on the effect of low levels of carbon monoxide on patients with heart disease produced for the Environmental Protection Agency have also been rejected. The major drug testing laboratory, Industrial Bio-Test, which handles the testing of many drugs and chemicals for both the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency has been accused of misconduct. Four scientists holding important positions with the company have been charged with falsifying data, and the administration of the laboratory has been described as “a shambles”.

Other cases are current and cannot yet be said to have been concluded but allegations well supported by scientific data have been made about the validity of crystallographic measurements relating to the structure of transfer RNA and published by Professor H H Paradies, lately of the Free University of Berlin. An internal investigation is proceeding in that university.

A similar investigation is being undertaken in the University of Geneva concerning the cloning of mouse embryos by Professor K Illmensee. It has to be said that an investigation by the Jackson Laboratory in Bar Harbour, Maine, where Illmensee did some of his work in collaboration, found no evidence of fraud, but a spokesman of the University of Geneva has intimated that the laboratory work books are not in order, calling it either a case of serious negligence or of intellectual falsification.

Another accusation has been made by Australian scientist Dr Ian Clark against his former teacher Dr A C Allison. Dr Clark claims that Allison pirated his ideas on the role of free oxygen radicals in immunity to malaria.

To counterbalance the Cyril Burt fraud on one side of the nature versus nurture debate Margaret Mead’s researches in Samoa have been challenged as unreliable, and another “great name” under suspicion is Sigmund Freud. It has been suggested that he falsified the details of his famous wolf man case history.

Some general points can be made about scientific fraud. Firstly, it is much more widespread than has been suspected or admitted. In my view those who know about such cases should make them public. Dishonest scientists should not be allowed to “pursue moderately successful careers of petty larceny.” Secondly, it is not only perpetrated by the insignificant working in backwaters. The Absalots of this world, whose works have never been cited, stand alongside the Cyril Burts, Margaret Meads, and R A Millikans, whose work has been fundamental in their specialties. Thirdly, there is a disturbing trend for those found guilty of fraud to have practised it from cradle to grave. Fraud is rarely an isolated instance; more likely a character defect.

You, sir, have pioneered the exposure of these frauds which undermine the standing of our subject and feed the tide of anti-scientism that is coming in. Pray keep up the good work.

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Fraud in science

T J Hamblin, MRCP; D Kerr, FRCP; Janina M Harvey, MRCPG

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SIR,—The article by Mr Larry Altman and Mr Laurie Melcher (25 June, p 2003) contains