

Hate-mail author trapped by DNA

Gideon Koren, a prominent Canadian pediatrician and researcher at the Hospital for Sick Children (HSC) and the University of Toronto, faces full dismissal from both positions after DNA evidence revealed him to be the author of hate mail sent to hematologist Nancy Olivieri and colleagues who have supported her during a protracted battle with the Canadian drug company Apotex. A number of allegations regarding Koren's scientific conduct are under investigation by a private disciplinary panel consisting of senior representatives from both institutions. Hospital spokesperson Cyndy deGiusti told *Nature Medicine* that results of the inquiry into Koren's behavior are "expected any day."

Unfortunately for the HSC, this is the latest twist in an unsettling series of events that began when Koren and Olivieri, hired in 1993 by Apotex to conduct clinical trials on the effectiveness of the oral iron chelator deferiprone in thalassemia, parted ways over Olivieri's *New England Journal of Medicine* publication reporting that the drug is neither effective nor safe (*Nature Med.* 4, 1095; 1998 and *Nature Med.* 5, 7, 1223; 1999). The ensuing battle between Apotex and Olivieri left a growing divide between the hospital's administration and several of its faculty, including Koren and a small group of scientists who expressed support for Olivieri.

Peter Durie, a senior HSC scientist and an active Olivieri supporter, received four hate-mail letters from Koren between October 1998 and May 1999. One included the line, "How did you ever get yourself in the middle of this group of pigs? Or did you think that their shit would not touch you?" The letter refers to Durie's involvement with Olivieri and two of her other supporters, Brenda Gallie and Hellen Chen. Other letters called Durie a

"foul air balloon" and encouraged him to leave the hospital.

Durie told *Nature Medicine* that he informed several people at the hospital—including the president and the head of human resources—immediately after receiving each letter. The hospital's inaction led him and his colleagues to hire a private investigator, a linguistic expert and a document analyst at their own expense. In May 1999, they presented HSC administration with evidence suggesting that Koren was likely to be the author of the letters. At this point the hospital hired its own investigator, Toronto lawyer and forensic investigator Barbara Humphrey.

In December of last year, after several months without news of Humphrey's in-

vestigation, Durie and colleagues hired a forensic laboratory to compare DNA obtained from a signed letter by Koren and from one of the anonymous letters. The DNA was a match. Humphrey arrived at the same conclusion shortly thereafter. After months of denial, Koren admitted to writing the letters based on the DNA results.

Earlier this year, lawyers representing both sides presented their cases before a closed panel comprising members from the HSC and the University of Toronto, including hospital president and chief executive officer Michael Strofolino and university president J. Robert Prichard. Olivieri adds that the allegations raised by her group include concerns over Koren's scientific conduct that go beyond the hate mail, although she is not at liberty to disclose details. Other sources have confirmed that allegations include possible forgery and fraud.

Laura Bonetta, Washington D.C.

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GMO controversy has adverse effects on UK research

Speaking last month at an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development conference on genetically modified food safety in Edinburgh, UK, leading plant sciences researcher Charles Arntzen warned that controversy over genetically modified organisms (GMO) in the UK could affect the nation's ability to commercialize research in the area.

Arntzen, who is president and CEO of the Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research at Cornell University, New York, has first-hand experience of the negative effect that public opinion can have on biomedical research. Axis Genetics, the British partner in his venture to develop and commercialize a system for using vegetables to administer subunit vaccines ('edible vaccines'; *Nature Med.* 4, 607-609; 1998) pulled out last year amid growing controversy over GMO technology.

Arntzen is now seeking new partners in the US, where he believes there is fairly even support for GMO R&D from the Food and Drug Administration and Congress. "In contrast, in Britain, it seems you can't even get to the point of discussing whether or not to permit transgenic plants," he says. With that attitude, "You are bound to lag farther and farther behind in a new industrial arena."

Tom Brutnell, who cut short a five-year fellowship at the University of Oxford to join Arntzen's institute, says that the anti-GMO atmosphere is causing a chill to run through British academia. Brutnell, who is developing a transposon mutagenesis system in maize, says there is a pervasive fear in the UK that not only is support for GMO research drying up, but also there is "worry that funding in general for plant science is going to be cut." The perceived lack of industry and government support is causing some scientists to reconsider both their research focus and whether they will stay in the UK, says Brutnell.

Some believe corporate support is already starting to evaporate. Derek Burke, former chairman of the UK's Advisory Committee on Novel Foods, says most of the major companies with agribusiness subsidiaries have moved their headquarters out of the UK. "That's going to have an inevitable effect on the future of R&D," he says.

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Charles Arntzen

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