

March 14, 2007

To the Editor:

When universities are forced to deal with allegations of misconduct in research, they have an obligation to keep the procedures confidential, because the merest hint of dishonesty can destroy a scientist's career and in the process deprive the world of important new knowledge. Most of us embrace the principle of innocence until guilt is proven, but the damage done by the glare of media publicity can linger long after the reporters have lost interest in an inquiry that does not reach a dramatic conclusion.

This problem was illustrated recently when the need to conduct a confidential inquiry brought Purdue University into conflict with some national media outlets' determination to report not only the facts of the case but every innuendo.

A glaring omission from the coverage by some publications was the fact that the Department of Health and Human Services' integrity guidelines require American institutions to protect "the confidentiality of respondents, complainants, and research subjects" when investigating allegations of misconduct. This confidentiality is inconvenient for journalists. It also is extremely challenging for scientists and administrators who face the unhappy task of judging the integrity of one of their colleagues, but it is necessary if we are to prevent the ruin of good reputations through malicious or erroneous claims.

Is the process perfect? Certainly not. Like the American system of justice, it is frustrating, confusing and tedious, but it is the process we have, and we must follow it carefully until we find a better one. Despite its imperfections, in the end, it usually does the right thing. The process works best when those alleging misconduct document their concerns thoroughly and cooperate fully with all aspects of the inquiry — including the requirement for confidentiality.

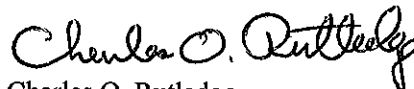
Please remember, an inquiry into a research misconduct allegation is not an inquiry into the verifiability of a research claim. Verifiability is decided by experimentation and debate, and often takes time to resolve. There can be legitimate differences of opinion regarding a laboratory observation. The Purdue administration's job is not to decide among such opinions.

Purdue University's policy on research integrity states: "The mere suspicion or allegation of wrongdoing, even if totally unjustified, is potentially damaging to a person's career. Consequently, no information about charges of a lack of integrity in research may be disclosed except to the appropriate university and federal authorities." Any response to an allegation of misconduct at Purdue will adhere completely to the letter and the spirit of that principle. We believe this is true at the vast majority of universities. Reports in some media that cover science would not give the public the opportunity to understand that truth. Nor would they allow for the possibility that a successful and fair inquiry might include a finding of not guilty.

Sincerely,



Sally Mason
Provost



Charles O. Rutledge
Vice President for Research