

Emory Reports on Darsee's Fraud

John R. Darsee, the young researcher who was forced to leave Harvard Medical School nearly 2 years ago after he was caught faking data, apparently has had a long and prolific career in data fabrication. Prior to going to Harvard as a fellow in Eugene Braunwald's cardiology laboratory at the Brigham and Women's Hospital, Darsee was in training at Emory University from 1974 to 1979. At least ten full-length papers and 45 abstracts, which Darsee coauthored with some of Emory's most prominent researchers, have been published on the basis of his work there. Most of them have now been retracted after an Emory investigation concluded that Darsee's work cannot be validated.

The Darsee case, which has raised serious questions about the way in which young investigators are supervised during their training, also raises issues about coauthors who allow their names on publications even though they have not done the research. The latter phenomenon has been revealed with particular clarity as the result of the Emory investigation. In several cases, senior scientists, in response to queries from the investigating committee, explained their failure to detect data fabrication by denying any knowledge of the research on which Darsee reported. Darsee, they assert, simply put their names on abstracts without their knowledge, and none of the Emory scientists apparently insisted that his or her name be removed.

According to Emory officials, only two of the ten papers are still considered valid. Of the 45 abstracts, again only two stand up to scrutiny. In a 5 May statement, Neil C. Moran, chairman of the Emory committee that spent more than a year on the Darsee case, said, "Many of the abstracts appear to be completely fictitious."

Donald O. Nutter, executive associate dean of the medical school, was among the senior faculty whose names Darsee added to published abstracts. In a telephone interview with *Science*, Nutter said, "I told John it was inappropriate behavior." But Nutter failed to take the extra step of insisting that his name be removed because Darsee was "fluent and convincing" when he argued that he owed Nutter credit because of his role in Darsee's training.

Virtually everyone who came in contact with Darsee at Emory (and later at Harvard) found him to be exceptionally able. Senior faculty quickly entrusted a lot to him. The one person who ever questioned the integrity of Darsee's work at Emory was Ayten Someren, a pathologist who reported data discrepancies to his superiors. But no substantial effort to investigate was made, and there was no mention of it in letters of recommendation Emory faculty sent to Harvard.

Moran, investigating chairman, reports that his committee did not go beyond its charge, which was to determine the extent of Darsee's data fabrication, to an analysis of how such widespread fraud could go undetected. (The Emory investigation took place only after Braunwald told researchers there that he was suspicious of material in Darsee's papers, much of which he found not scientifically creditable.)

A full study of the "why and how" of the Darsee case, Moran said, would have required a more lengthy, complex investigation than the committee was prepared to undertake. However, he said, "How it happened in one way is

quite simple. When all principles involved neglect to take full intellectual responsibility for the research, including examination of data, statistical analysis, and assessment of expert consultation, it is easy for a person inclined to dishonesty to get away with it."

In one instance of reputed fraud, Darsee coauthored a paper with cardiologist S. B. Hyemsfield in *The New England Journal of Medicine* on taurine levels in heart patients. The Moran committee report states that "there are no original records of this project at Emory University." Hyemsfield does not remember the patients. The published paper does not identify any hospital or clinic as the place the patients came from. Furthermore, the acknowledgment at the end of the paper expresses "indebtedness" to three scientists who apparently do not exist. A Johnson S. Caulder, Ph.D., is, for instance, credited with doing amino acid analyses for the study. Yet no such person has ever worked at either Emory or Harvard. Moran thinks this should have been a clue to Darsee's supervisors. "It is not unusual to have interlaboratory collaboration," Moran says, but the senior investigators ought to actually know their collaborators.

Darsee did not meet personally with the Moran committee, but he did respond by letter to some of its inquiries. "The names of the three persons acknowledged at the end of the Taurine paper were mentioned in the hospital chart of one of the family members I first saw in clinic when I was an intern in 1974," the report quotes as Darsee's reply. "... Neither Steve Hyemsfield nor I had any correspondence with them. They are not from Georgia but I don't remember where any of them are from."

At present, Darsee, who declines to talk to the press, is working at Ellis Hospital in Schenectady, New York, where he has recently been shifted from a training program in critical-care medicine to working with computers. Darsee has been "removed from patient contact," according to hospital spokesman Andrew Foster who says that the hospital, which has stood by Darsee, is "trying to ascertain his place in medicine." Hospital staff, Foster says, frequently describe Darsee as being "brilliant" and "charismatic."

Emory promptly sent a copy of the Moran report to the National Institutes of Health but was troubled by the issue of sending it directly to Ellis Hospital administrators or medical licensing boards. "We have come to no conclusion and no consensus about our responsibility here," Moran says, noting liability as one concern. "One argument against direct notification is that we would be questioning his competence as a physician and we have no basis for that. What we have is evidence of dishonesty in research." But, Moran says, "I'm not trying to defend our lack of action." According to Ellis Hospital spokesman Foster, the hospital has requested a copy of the report and has been told one will be sent.

Although there has been no formal faculty discussion of the aftermath of the Darsee case at Emory as yet, the subject will come up in June at a meeting of department chairmen. Much of the response to date, Moran reports, has been what he calls the "bad apple, these things don't happen very often sort." Says he, "I don't think that's adequate."—BARBARA J. CULLITON