

Battle Over Error

We write to correct factual errors published in the article "A bitter battle over error (II)" by Barbara J. Culliton (News & Comment, 1 July, p. 18).

1) Culliton indicates in her article that when we completed our manuscript analyzing the *Cell* paper (1), we decided against contacting its authors and that we contacted them only after authorities at the National Institutes of Health told us to. In fact, senior NIH officials sent us two memoranda telling us *not* to communicate with the authors of the *Cell* paper. We repeatedly asked that this prohibition be lifted. When NIH eventually granted permission, we promptly wrote the authors and sent them our manuscript.

2) According to the article, David Baltimore "did agree" to give us copies of two reviews, namely, the Eisen and Wortis reports. The article fails to mention that despite our repeated requests, neither he nor anyone else at Massachusetts Institute of Technology or Tufts ever sent us copies of these reports.

3) The article states that Baltimore demanded from us "an agreement to drop the subject" if a committee of immunologists concluded that the norms of scientific research were not transgressed. Baltimore actually said that Stewart must stop both public and private discussions of the issue. The article indicates that we rejected Baltimore's proposal. In fact, we agreed to the investigating committee, but not to the condition that we be silent.

4) The article states: "Without access to all of the original data, it is impossible to fully evaluate Stewart and Feder's analysis." In fact, our analysis can be fully evaluated by examination of the data on which it is based.

5) The article asserts that Stewart favors the correction of published errors that are minor. In fact, Stewart's stated view is that the need to correct errors parallels their importance and that it is generally appropriate to ignore minor errors.

6) The article states that in 1986 Feder was officially rated, after an appeal, as having only "partially met" a certain requirement of his job. It fails to mention that this was overruled 2 months later on further appeal; the performance rating was changed to "fully successful."

7) Culliton writes that a "graduate student" challenged the data. At the time, Margot O'Toole had been a postdoctoral fellow for 7 years.

8) The article states that our phones

"ring constantly" with calls from those alleging scientific error or misconduct. In fact, we were receiving perhaps two calls a week.

9) According to the article, we "would settle for nothing less than access to the data" for the *Cell* paper. This is misleading; we simply asked the authors for access to their data, and they rejected our request.

10) Culliton describes us incorrectly as saying that we can no longer do science: "They say it is because NIH has so cut back their research resources that they can no longer do science." We did not make such a statement, and indeed we carry out laboratory research on a limited scale with the resources that have been assigned to us.

11) Culliton claims that we had agreed with NIH authorities to restrict our studies of professional practices. We did not agree to this restriction: it was imposed on us despite our objections.

12) The article erroneously states that a member of the National Academy of Sciences occupies a windowless basement laboratory on the same floor as ours.

The article contains some other errors and misleading statements that are not discussed here.

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REFERENCES

1. D. Weaver *et al.*, *Cell* 45, 247 (1986).

Response: Stewart and Feder's letter is subtly and sometimes downright misleading throughout. The following points are illustrative.

Item 1. Stewart and Feder wrote their manuscript critical of the *Cell* paper and submitted it to NIH officials for routine clearance without having contacted the paper's authors. Stewart and Feder are correct in noting that NIH officials then asked them not to contact the authors until the NIH fraud office could contemplate the issue. Initial discussion took place on 28 October 1986. On 12 December NIH scientific director Edward Rall gave them permission to contact the authors.

Items 3 and 9 can be considered together. Stewart and Feder state that they agreed to an investigating committee and that *Science* was misleading in saying that they "would settle for nothing less than access to the data." According to a chronology of events written by Stewart and Feder themselves, they rejected David Baltimore's suggestion that the NIH appoint a committee to look into the dispute. "We suggested instead that he himself appoint a committee and that we

[emphasis added] and the committee jointly be given access to the original laboratory findings." Their letter to Baltimore was dated 18 March 1988, months after they began asking for access to the data.

As part of his proposal that NIH appoint a committee, Baltimore asked Stewart and Feder to stop discussion of the issue if the committee found the paper to be within scientific norms. As Stewart and Feder confirm in their letter to *Science*, Baltimore asked them to agree to drop the matter in both public and private discussion. Baltimore's request was made in a 17 March 1987 letter to NIH scientific director Rall.

Science obtained a copy of this and more than 100 other pages of pertinent memos and correspondence through the Freedom of Information Act.

Item 4. Stewart and Feder's criticisms of the *Cell* paper are based on 17 pages of laboratory data. The authors assert that those 17 pages do not represent all of the data. It is not possible to resolve the question of whether the paper misrepresents the data on which it is based without reviewing that data in toto.

Item 6. Stewart and Feder circulated a copy of Feder's 1986 performance review as described in our article. Perhaps they refer to a different review than the one they sent out.

Item 8. Perhaps it would have been more accurate to state that on those occasions when this reporter has been in Stewart and Feder's lab, their phones were ringing constantly and that they indicated it was a recurring phenomenon. Indeed, *Science* has no firsthand evidence to support their statement.

It is worth noting with respect to Stewart and Feder's statement that they get "perhaps two calls a week" that they say they do not keep any data to verify that statement. On 21 June, during an interview with *Science* that was interrupted by frequent phone calls, Stewart said that he and Feder receive "100 allegations or problems a year that appear to be meritorious or at least not delusional," and added "I wouldn't want to keep records or have that minute an accounting." In testimony before the House of Representatives on 12 April, Stewart and Feder said that "perhaps the majority" of those 100 allegations are about past events. (Hearing transcript, p. 92.)

Item 10. Stewart and Feder have not only told *Science* that they can no longer do research. They have told others.

As long ago as 29 August 1985, they wrote to John Maddox, editor of *Nature*, and said, "As you know for the past two years we have done almost no laboratory work. Dr. Roth [their supervisor] has expressed strong dissatisfaction with the pro-