

# Fraudbusters Back at NIH

*After a stint on Capitol Hill with Congressman John Dingell, Walter Stewart and Ned Feder are back in the lab*

WALTER STEWART AND NED FEDER, the duo who have made a name for themselves as self-appointed fraud-busters, have been quietly sent down from Capitol Hill and are now back in their basement lab at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda—their status as science's policemen uncertain.

For more than a year now, Stewart and Feder have been working for Representative John D. Dingell (D-MI) on detail from NIH. Recently, Dingell had a chance to ask that their detail to the House subcommittee on oversight and investigations be extended. He declined.

Why? An aide said only that "somebody at HHS [the Department of Health and Human Services] said we'd had Stewart and Feder long enough. . . . I couldn't argue with their position." Or at any rate, the Dingell subcommittee chose not to argue. The aide said only that, "Walter was doing things that were not of immediate interest to the subcommittee."

Instead of working for Dingell full time, the two fraud investigators will be available "as needed," but not more than 2 or 3 days a month. Which leaves the question: what will Stewart and Feder do now that they are reassigned to their old lab? In response to an inquiry from *Science*, Stewart offered a crisp "No comment."

However, NIH officials say they are "working with Walter and Ned to develop a scientific protocol consistent with the mission of the intramural mission of the diabetes institute." Does that include the investigation of fraud and misconduct full-time? "No," is the NIH response. Instead, NIH officials noted that the institutes have an Office of Scientific Integrity and HHS has a fraud oversight office as well. "They could ask to be reassigned within the department," *Science* was told.

Prior to embarking on a career as overseers of scientific probity, Stewart and Feder made a mark in research with a paper on a Lucifer yellow dye that is widely used in neuroscience research. However, neither has published a paper in basic research in more than a decade. What they did publish, after some 3 years of editorial negotiating, was a study in the 15 January 1987 issue of *Nature*. That article presented their analysis of the publication records of 47 scientists who were, at one time or another, coauthors on

fraud in one of the 1980s' most publicized cases (*Science*, 1 April 1983, p. 31). It was an interest in the Darsee case that got the two into the fraud game.

Throughout the past decade, Stewart and Feder's relationship with NIH has been what one might call stressful all around. In 1985, several labs in Stewart and Feder's institute were moved as part of a general reallocation of space and renovation of one of the NIH buildings. According to NIH documents on the issue, their lab was unusually large, their research productivity unusually low.

Stewart and Feder were moved from a lab in Building 4 to the basement of Building 8, which is home to several other labs as well. In the process, equipment that had not been marked for relocation ended up in salvage and in the NIH dumpster. When they heard their storage room had been cleaned out, they wrote in a memo to the NIH brass, "We raced to Surplus and located some of the equipment, some on the floor. . . . We ran to the Salvage Yard. . . . The two of us (NF and WWS) then climbed up a ladder and down into the Dumpster (very unpleasant, as it was full of all kinds of metal and wood pieces, some broken glass and a few dead animals)." From this a few items were retrieved and a war of memos was launched.

Stewart and Feder saw the episode as evidence of harassment. NIH officials took the incident as evidence that the two researchers were not serious enough about their lab work to safeguard their equipment.

In the total scheme of things, it is an episode that stands as an apt metaphor for the relationship between Stewart and Feder and their superiors.

Still, Stewart and Feder have won a remarkable concession from the institutes. In the wake of the prolonged work on the *Nature* paper, NIH officially rewrote their job description to allow them to spend 20% of their time on fraud cases. But gradually the fraud business occupied all their time and their basic scientific research fell off.

At first, Stewart and Feder's assignment to the Dingell subcommittee seemed to be a good solution to the conflict over their proper role in the intramural program at

NIH. Why, after less than 2 years, did it come to an end? There is much speculation among Washington observers.

One important part of a congressional staff member's job is to make his congressman look good. Stewart and Feder were, to all intents and purposes, Dingell staffers. But Dingell has not won universal praise for the recent investigations they spurred. Dingell has held three hearings on a paper published in *Cell* in 1986 whose most noteworthy quality is that it was coauthored by



**Home again.** Fraud experts Walter Stewart (left) and Ned Feder have returned to their lab at NIH.

Nobel laureate David Baltimore. But the focus of the hearings has been a scientist, Theresa Imanishi-Kari—of less renown. In the end, these headline-making inquiries have earned Dingell the reputation at NIH—and among notable scientists—of being a bully and an enfant terrible who is out to get scientists.

It is, Dingell's colleagues say, an image he does not like. Dingell's father, a member of Congress in the early days of NIH, is remembered as a supporter of biomedical research. Dingell's brother works at NIH. His wife contributed volunteer hours and clout to creation of the new Children's Inn at NIH for young patients and their families.

At present, the subcommittee does have a couple of fraud items on its agenda. It plans to issue a report on the way Tufts University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and NIH played their respective parts in the investigation of the *Cell* paper. Staff members say that there are other cases to be exposed, but no specifics have been offered. A hearing on the NIH inquiry on Robert Gallo (*Science*, 22 June, p. 1494) is mentioned as an ever present possibility.

Meanwhile, these things will be pursued without the full-time services of Stewart and Feder. And whether the tenor of the subcommittee vis-à-vis biomedical research will change remains to be seen.

■ BARBARA J. CULLITON