

## Would-Be Academician Pirates Papers

*Five of his published papers are demonstrable plagiarisms, and more than 55 others are suspect*

Elias A. K. Alsabti, M.B., Ch.B. (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery), who calls himself a blood relation of the Jordanian royal family, wanted to make something of himself. So in 1977 he came to the United States for postgraduate medical education, an education financed by His Royal Highness Crown Prince Hassan, brother of King Hussein of Jordan.

Alsabti worked hard at one U.S. institution after another, including the M. D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute in Houston, Texas. His climb into the higher reaches of the U.S. academic establishment was rapid. While gaining a Ph.D. in cancer immunology and membership in 11 scientific societies, he performed cancer research and published more than 60 papers, the majority in 1979 alone. The address for reprint requests on many of these papers was the Royal Scientific Society in Amman, Jordan, and Alsabti intimated to a few colleagues in America that on return to Jordan he would be named director of a prestigious cancer institute.

This was not to be the case, however, for the academic empire that Alsabti had so meticulously constructed began to fall apart. Now, almost 3 years after he came to the United States, much if not all of Alsabti's work is suspected of belonging to other researchers. The incident, just starting to be understood in its full dimensions, is sending strong tremors through the world of scientific publication and is likely to initiate a general shake-up in the way not a few journals review and accept manuscripts.

A key problem was Alsabti's method of publication. There was the case, for instance, where three identical review articles signed by Alsabti in as many journals turned out to have come, word for word, from a grant application of a Philadelphia-based researcher. In another instance, an article by Alsabti in a European journal had been lifted almost verbatim from a paper published in Japan some 2 years earlier. In a third case it turned out that an Alsabti article published in a Japanese journal had come from the about-to-be-published dissertation research of a University of Kansas graduate student. Questions

were also raised about the authenticity of his other articles when, for example, a computer search of the scientific literature showed that Alsabti's numerous coauthors, with names such as A. M. Taleb, K. A. Saleh, and A. S. Talat, never published except with him, suggesting that they were fictitious.

The collapse of the Alsabti empire was abetted by questions about his credentials. No one really knew just where or even if he had received his Ph.D.—the initials had merely appeared one day on a published paper. He worked in U.S. institutions on a non-degree "fellowship" basis, an arrangement that required the Jordanians to pay large sums to the sponsoring school for tuition and laboratory fees. For that matter, no one had ever seen papers proving he graduated from medical school in the Middle East.

It also turned out that the Jordanians had not supported him as a member of the royal family, as Alsabti had boasted to some colleagues, but as a regular, run-of-the-mill scholarship student, one who fell into poor repute after the Jordanian Embassy in Washington, D.C., received several complaints concerning his royal misrepresentations and plagiarisms. Alsabti, according to the Jordanians, has at no time had anything to do with the Royal Scientific Society in Amman. And he is no relation of the royal family. Not taking kindly to such ploys and antics, the Jordanians in February 1979 cut off his funds. Says Shaer Bak, deputy ambassador to the United States for Jordan: "If anyone can bring a legal case against him, we will be more than happy."

This may prove difficult, for no one knows just where Alsabti is now living. His house in Houston is up for sale, and directory assistance had no listing for him in London, which is where he told friends in Houston he was moving. Alsabti, 25, one of the few to live a life of "pirate or perish" on such a grand scale, was last seen in the Houston during April 1980, driving his yellow Cadillac.

There is, however, a fitting epilogue to all this that occurred outside the United States. In May, Alsabti showed up on the Caribbean isle of Montserrat for a short visit to the American University of the Caribbean (AUC), a last resort for

would-be doctors who have been rejected by U.S. medical schools (*Science*, 23 February 1979). The school is run by electrical engineer Paul S. Tien, who first opened AUC's doors in Cincinnati, Ohio. Alsabti, who during the previous year had corresponded with Tien and sent records of his clinical rotations at a Houston hospital to AUC in lieu of working in Cincinnati or on Montserrat, went to the isle to take part in graduation ceremonies, where he finally received his M.D. degree.

That a person such as Alsabti achieved so extensive a publication record suggests that parts of the international system of journals and the review of submitted manuscripts are in serious trouble, according to some researchers who worked with Alsabti. "This whole episode to me had indicated just what journals I don't even have to look at," says Giora Mavligit, professor of medicine at M. D. Anderson. "I don't want to mention any names, but it's a big deal, because some of them are not exactly garbage." A glance at *Index Medicus* shows that some of Alsabti's articles appeared in *Journal of Cancer Research and Clinical Oncology* (United States), *Japanese Journal of Experimental Medicine*, *Neoplasma* (Czechoslovakia), *European Surgical Research* (Switzerland), *Oncology* (Switzerland), *Urologia Internationalis* (Switzerland), *Journal of Clinical Hematology and Oncology* (United States), *Tumor Research* (Japan), *Journal of Surgical Oncology* (United States), *Gynecologic Oncology* (United States), *British Journal of Urology*, and *Japanese Journal of Medical Science and Biology*.

Episodes involving the Alsabti's of the world can be avoided, according to E. Frederick Wheelock, professor of microbiology at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, who let Alsabti work in his lab for 5 months and who, as a result, had his grant application pirated. "Upon receiving articles from an individual who has never published there before, an editor should verify the credentials of that individual. That can be done by authenticating personal communications and acknowledgements cited in the article and by requesting reviews of such articles by

individuals who are prominently referenced."

In Alsabti's case, moreover, an astute editor might have noticed other clues. Take, for example, reprint addresses. Among his papers published in 1979 alone, one finds listed not only the Royal Scientific Society in Jordan but two residential addresses in the United States and three in England. A final reprint address that keeps popping up is something called the "Albaath Specific Protein Reference Unit" in Baghdad, Iraq, for which Alsabti in one paper claimed to be director. No one in Iraq that this reporter spoke to, however, had ever heard of such a unit.

As with addresses for reprint requests, so too with institutional affiliations. Alsabti was a quick change artist, in one case using two different affiliations in the same volume of one journal. In *Tumor Research* (Sapporo, Japan, vol. 13, 1978), Alsabti had three articles: "Tumor dormancy: A review" on pages 1-13, "Carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA) in plasma of patients with malignant and non-malignant diseases" on pages 57-63, and "Serum immunoglobulins in acute myelogenous leukemia" on pages 64-69. In the first, his affiliation was listed as the Royal Scientific Society, in the second and third, as the Albaath Specific Protein Reference Unit.

Slow to generalize from the example of Alsabti to the world of scientists at large, some researchers are nevertheless worried that a similar situation could crop up again. Wheelock, who had the background section of his grant application turned into three identical review articles by Alsabti, one of which is the "Tumor dormancy" paper mentioned above, notes that anyone can get copies of grant applications from the U.S. Public Health Service through the Freedom of Information Act.

Why did Alsabti choose his unique path of career advancement? "Three things about Alsabti are important to keep in mind," says Mavligit. "He is very smart, very ambitious, and rich as hell. He does not need *any* money. When you've got all these three things together, all you want to do is become famous. . . . He did a damn good job in our lab, but he apparently felt that making a career that way was going to be too slow for his taste."

Quite instructive in this regard is the story of how Alsabti gained entry into various U.S. schools and laboratories and how he actually pirated the papers. It reads like a novel and shows him using every trick in the con artist's book.

"I met Alsabti at an international

meeting in Brussels," says Herman Friedman, who now teaches at the University of South Florida College of Medicine in Tampa but back in 1977 taught at Temple University in Philadelphia. "He was a tall guy in a white suit. He came out of the audience, introduced himself as an M.D. from Baghdad, and said his government was going to give him money to come to America to study for a Ph.D. and he would like to work for me."

Back in the United States, Friedman forgot about Alsabti until he unexpectedly showed up in the summer of 1977, ready to go to work. Alsabti, unbeknown to Friedman, had used his name while corresponding directly with administrators at Temple. Alsabti lasted a month. "One day he came into my office and showed me a paper he was working on—a new vaccine for leukemia in Jordan. He had 150 patients he had vaccinated and prevented from dying. The vaccine was a secret, however, and he only followed the patients for 6 months, whereas leukemia, of course, takes longer than 6 months to kill. I asked him about the methods, but he didn't know the methods. He said the technicians did it." Alsabti was soon after asked to leave the lab.

Whereupon in November 1977 he went to Wheelock at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. Wheelock felt

says Wheelock, "and I told him after the meeting that it was his last day in the lab."

Wheelock did not know it, but when Alsabti left, he also took the grant application and the drafts of some manuscripts. Alsabti had not been involved with the writing of the research grant proposal, which was in fact submitted more than 4 months prior to Alsabti's arrival in the lab.

When Wheelock saw the three review articles coming out under Alsabti's name, he wrote to him in Texas and demanded that Alsabti publish a letter in the journals acknowledging the source of the materials. If he did not, Wheelock went on, he himself would publish a letter explaining the situation in a widely circulated journal.

Alsabti's reply? "You have made certain allegations," he wrote in an 8 February 1980 handwritten letter, "which are an insult to my integrity. First and foremost, let me take this opportunity to make it clear that I greatly appreciated the time and effort you showed me during my fellowship at your laboratory. This great misunderstanding confuses me as I in no way intended to plagiarize your work. References were made throughout the article crediting you, amongst others, for your individual achievements. Let me remind you that the article in question was a review,

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sorry for Alsabti. Here, after all, was a young, bright student of royal Jordanian blood who was having difficulty adjusting to a new country. Wheelock felt Alsabti had not been given a fair chance at Temple. "I tried to befriend him and even got him into a clinical oncology program here," says Wheelock. Alsabti also worked in Wheelock's lab, worked until April 1978, when two young researchers came to Wheelock and said they had proof that Alsabti was making up data in his research. Wheelock called in Alsabti, and all four of them talked over the situation. "The evidence was very strong,"

which gives the writer the opportunity to collaborate materials from various sources as long as credit is given. There can be no doubt that in this instance, when and if similarity did exist, credit was specifically designated. Certainly if you attempt upon [sic] writing your own letter for publication in a journal, I will be coerced into taking all legal steps to protect my interest."

Wheelock then drafted a letter detailing how Alsabti took the materials, a letter that was published in the 12 April issue of *The Lancet*. Wheelock has not yet heard from Alsabti's lawyers.

How did Alsabti, with such a trail of deceit already behind him, manage to climb into ever higher reaches of academia? "The guy knows the system well," says Mavligit, "he goes right to the top—right to the president." In this case he went to the president of M. D. Anderson, Lee Clark. Alsabti showed Clark letters from the Surgeon General of the Jordanian Armed Forces, letters of introduction saying Alsabti was in the United States for postgraduate medical education. In September 1978, Alsabti was assigned to Mavligit's lab. While there, he performed, in addition to his lab work, another of the demonstrable cases of paper piracy.

This involved a manuscript sent to Jeffery Gottlieb, an assistant professor of medicine at M. D. Anderson. What the editor of the journal did not realize was that Gottlieb could not review it, for he had been dead since July 1975. The manuscript nonetheless arrived from the *European Journal of Cancer*. It sat in a mailbox until one day Alsabti picked it up, made a few minor changes, and mailed it off, including the original photographs of the relevant figures. An addition that Alsabti did make to the manuscript was the names of two fictitious coauthors, Omar Naser Ghalib, and Mohammed Hamid Salem. The *Japanese Journal of Medical Science and Biology* published Alsabti's article before the original article from which it was taken got into print. "When I first saw the Japanese paper I went into a depression for about a week," says Daniel Wierda, who at the time was a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Kansas and is now a post-doc at the Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology in North Carolina. "I didn't know what to do." Wierda, who fears that his publication record will now be blemished in the mind of those who don't know the whole story, has asked the editor of the Japanese journal to print a retraction. He has not yet received a reply.

Details of this plagiarism show Alsabti's method, and why tracing him through the literature is difficult. In Wierda's paper (vol. 15, 1979), coauthored by Thomas L. Pazdernik, his adviser, the title was "Suppression of spleen lymphocyte mitogenesis in mice injected with platinum compounds." In Alsabti's paper (vol. 32, 1979), the title has been changed to "Effect of platinum compounds on murine lymphocyte mitogenesis." The opening sentence in each paper is identical "Since Rosenberg *et al.* [1] first described the anti-tumour properties of *cis*-dichlorodiammineplatinum (DDP) against the sarcoma 180 tumor in mice, many different

platinum compounds have been synthesized. . . ."

Mavligit eventually got wind of Alsabti's antics. One day when Alsabti asked Mavligit to look at a paper he was working on, Mavligit noticed that Alsabti had forgotten to take out some words indicating it was Wheelock's grant proposal. Mavligit went to Clark and complained, and Alsabti was asked to leave M. D. Anderson in February 1979.

One reason that Alsabti was able to get away with plagiarisms for so long, according to Mavligit, is that no one ever wants to get involved. "Alsabti knows the system and he knows nobody wants to get dirty. Nobody wants to be the first to say, hey, this guy is a fake."

Where could all this take Alsabti? Armed with a curriculum vitae that now boasted scores of publications, he applied at Baylor College in Houston for a

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residency program in neurosurgery. He almost got accepted—until one careful administrator decided to call Mavligit and check up on what seemed to be a wondrous record.

By this time, February 1979, the details of Alsabti's exploits had started to arrive in Jordan from various disgruntled sources, and His Royal Highness Crown Prince Hassan cut off Alsabti's funds. At this point, Alsabti decided to lay low and pursue a more mundane path. He applied to the American University of the Caribbean and worked at South West Memorial Hospital in Houston on clinical rotations. He lived in Houston until April 1980, all the while apparently publishing papers.

No one knows how many of Alsabti's articles are still rummaging around the worldwide publication mill. To take just one example, the editor of *Journal of Clinical Hematology and Oncology*, Amanullah Kahn, says Alsabti submitted nine articles in all to his journal. Seven were accepted, six have been printed, and the one that was most recently slated

for publication has been pulled until it can be authenticated as actual research by Alsabti.

For journals that have printed papers now known to have been pirated, retraction seems like the logical move. Such an outcome, however, seems unlikely in at least one case. Wheelock wrote to Ekkehard Grundmann, who is on the editorial board of *Journal of Cancer Research and Clinical Oncology* in West Germany, which had published one of the "Tumor dormancy" papers, and asked for a retraction to be printed. Wheelock wrote in March and again in May. He still has not received an answer. When this reporter called Grundmann in West Germany, he said "we never print a retraction. It's just not done." What will happen with other requests for retraction in journals around the world remains to be seen.

The confusion generated by Alsabti's rise through the world of scientific publication is clear, but just how or even where his career got started back in the Middle East remains obscure. He now carries a Jordanian passport, but the Jordanian Embassy in Washington says that at some earlier date he immigrated to Jordan from Iraq. On a curriculum vitae that Alsabti circulated in Houston, he claimed to have graduated in 1976 with M.B. and Ch.B. degrees from Basra Medical College in southern Iraq, not from the College of Medicine at the University of Baghdad, as Alsabti told some U.S. researchers. Several calls to Iraq could produce no confirmation of his having received a degree from either school. For those who do graduate from one of these schools, Iraqi law requires that the doctor serve first in the armed forces for one year, and then in the government health service for a period of 6 years.

Also unclear is Alsabti's relation to the office of the Jordanian Crown Prince. Bak, at the Jordanian embassy, says only two or three students a year are supported by the Crown Prince on scholarship, as Alsabti was, but that he "does not remember" the circumstances of how Alsabti initially received his Jordanian support. In any event, they are now upset by the whole episode. Not the least annoying to the Jordanians is the fact that Alsabti recently published a paper in which he claimed as one of the coauthors Major General D. Hanania, Director of the Jordanian Royal Medical Services and Surgeon General of the Jordanian Armed Forces. This, says Bak, is definitely not the case, as Hanania has at no time worked with Alsabti on any paper.—WILLIAM J. BROAD