Imbroglio at Yale (II): A Top Job Lost

Ivy league researcher with data-fudging colleague is forced to resign, blames institutional "mass hysteria"

From Philip Felig's point of view, what began in 1978 as an old-fashioned battle for priority in publication had snowballed over the course of 1979 into a bothersome ordeal. A rival in a distant laboratory had charged Felig and an associate, Vijay Soman, with wholesale plagiarism. Upon questioning, Soman had admitted lifting some 60 words. Hardly earthshaking, this admission had nonetheless led the rival researcher to call for a scientific audit into whether or not the Soman-Felig study at Yale had ever been done. For months during the fall and winter of 1979 an appointed auditor had not materialized, apparently thinking the exercise would be time wasted. Unfortunately for Felig, the auditor was wrong.

Grave problems with Soman's research were uncovered in February 1980—research that had already resulted in a paper coauthored by Felig. The situation was sensitive because Felig was in the midst of a delicate negotiation. With a curriculum vitae boasting some 200 publications, he was about to leave a vice-chairmanship at Yale in order to become chairman and Samuel Bard professor of medicine at the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons. The situation called for candor, for a conversation with the dean.

Dark and serious 19th-century portraits of Samuel Bard professors peered down from the walls as Felig, sitting in the office of Columbia Dean Donald F. Tapley on 27 February 1980, recounted the unseemly events. Felig mentioned the junior researcher he had planned on bringing to Columbia, Vijay Soman. Now, he said, that would not be possible. Felig told Tapley that an audit at Yale revealed that Soman had fudged data, and that Soman had been fired. A Soman-Felig paper with the doctored data was being retracted, he said. Another audit that might result in further retractions was in the offing.

What Felig did not mention to Tapley or any other official at Columbia was the battle for priority, the year-old charges by a rival researcher, the admission of plagiarism by Soman, and the months-long delay in the audit.

These omissions proved to be significant. A little more than 5 months later, a faculty committee at Columbia would force Felig to resign in part because of his failure to tell the whole story right from the start.

The saga of what Felig told and neglected to tell people at Columbia is rife with contrasts and ironies. Some officials were told much, others were told nothing. At times Felig tried to tell his story clearly, but the upshot was confusion. In the end, rumors of what was going on in Felig's laboratory at Yale far outdistanced the facts made available, and this helped seal Felig's fate at Columbia.

Not the least ironic aspect to the whole affair has to do with the plagiarism. Felig and his superiors at Yale felt that the "exaggerated attacks" of the rival researcher called for low-key responses. They thought the plagiarism was trivial and were in no rush to tell people at Columbia about it. The Columbia committee, on the other hand, found it a serious matter. This is a bit curious, however. The Columbia committee never saw the actual plagiarism, the 60 odd words. They simply accepted as true the somewhat sweeping charges made by the rival researcher.

For Yale officials, this difference in the perception of key events has led to a sense of not understanding what went wrong. "A man's career has been shattered," says Samuel Thier, chairman of medicine at Yale. "But what has he really done wrong? Of what is he really guilty?"

Felig's courtship by Columbia began in the spring of 1979 when he was first contacted by the medical school's search committee. By December he was offered and had accepted the job, with the intention of starting in June 1980. Throughout the process of search and selection, Felig made no mention of the problems with Soman, which at that point had mainly to do with the plagiarism and the pending audit. Felig still considered the problems trivial. Evidence of this are two acts in January 1980—acts that appear astounding in light of what is now known about Soman's methods. First, Felig told the *American Journal of Medicine* to go ahead and publish the Soman-Felig manuscript, "Insulin binding to monocytes and insulin sensitivity in anorexia nervosa." All but two of the passages lifted from the manuscript of the rival researcher, Helena Wachslicht-Rodbard, were printed there word for word. Second, he brought Soman on a visit to Columbia with the recommendation that Soman be appointed assistant professor of medicine.

In January, while Felig was promoting Soman at Columbia, a storm was gathering back at Yale. On 5 February an auditor from Harvard medical school reported that the problem went beyond the mere lifting of a few words. Soman had actually fudged many of the data for the *American Journal of Medicine* paper. On 14 February, Felig and administrators at Yale asked for Soman's resignation and decided that an even wider ranging audit was in order.

The situation was becoming grave, but Felig and his superiors at Yale were still silent on these issues with at least one significant official at Columbia, Paul A. Marks, 53, a hard-headed administrator who does not take to sitting on the side-

On 5 August 1980, after some 2 months in the position, Philip Felig was forced to resign as chairman of medicine at the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons. At issue was a scandal in the laboratory of one of Felig's junior associates and coauthors back at Yale medical school, where Felig had previously worked and has now returned. This laboratory upset has resulted in the retraction of 11 papers.

An article last week looked at the way in which the scientific problems unfolded at Yale. Discussed here is the ensuing controversy at Columbia and why it resulted in Felig's resignation.

A key complaint by Columbia officials is that Felig was not forthcoming with details of the research fiasco at Yale. For them, the moral is clear. "Search committees used to ask polite and gentlemanly questions," says one. "Now all that will change."

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lines. Then vice president at Columbia for health sciences and now president of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Marks had been in New Haven on 26 February to give a lecture at Yale. Afterward he stopped in the office of Robert W. Berliner, dean of the Yale medical school. Though they spoke of Felig and of recruitment issues in general, Berliner did not mention the problems with Soman. That same evening, Marks had dinner at Felig's house, and Felig afterward drove Marks back to Manhattan. During this long drive, after a pleasant evening

Donald F. Tapley

Knew about audits and retraction of a single paper.

and a good meal, Felig spoke only of his future at Columbia, not of the audit at Yale or the problems with Soman. In retrospect, this omission was significant. It was Marks, angry that he had not been told of the problems, who almost singlehandedly called together the faculty committee that eventually asked for Felig's resignation.

On 27 February, the next day, Felig gave a seminar at Columbia and then talked to Tapley, telling him about the audit and the doctored data. A conspicuous question that Tapley might have asked at this point was why the audit had been performed in the first place. Unfortunately, he did not. If Tapley had, or if Felig had volunteered further information, it might have saved Felig the trouble of moving to Columbia.

Why tell Tapley and not Marks? Felig now says that it would have been inappropriate to discuss the situation with the vice president without first telling the dean. Although Felig is technically correct about such administrative protocol, common sense suggests in retrospect that an allusion to the problem would not have been far out of line.

A major misunderstanding arose at the meeting with the dean. Tapley assumed from Felig's description of the events that the audits were internal matters at Yale. Tapley did not therefore realize that Soman's books had already been scrutinized by a researcher from Harvard or that someone from the University of Colorado had also been called in to do the same. The fact that the scientific community at large was learning about the troubles at Yale long before high-ranking officials at Columbia were told became a critical factor in why the judgment of the Columbia committee was so swift and final.

After Felig left, Tapley called Berliner at Yale, who acknowledged the Soman problems but staunchly defended Felig's integrity. Tapley was relieved. He did not mention the conversations with Felig and Berliner to other officials at Columbia, not even Marks.

Back at Yale, the gathering storm was about to break. In preparation for the second audit, Felig and Soman and another researcher went into Berliner's office on 10 March in order to collate the raw data sheets. It soon became clear that the data books and sheets for nine of Soman's papers were missing. Seven of these had been coauthored by Felig.

Two weeks later, on 22 and 23 March, Jerrold M. Olefsky of the University of Colorado reported additional problems with the data that were available. For the five papers that were under scrutiny, from 25 to 50 percent of the data were missing, and in one paper Olefsky considered the published conclusions unwarranted.

Results of the Olefsky audit were mailed on Tuesday, 8 April, to Berliner at Yale, who by previous arrangement was to be the only recipient of the written results. They did not reach him until much later. On Saturday, 12 April, Berliner left for a months travel, first to a scientific meeting in Anaheim, California, then to a symposium in Dunedin, New Zealand. He did not see the audit until he returned to Yale on Monday, 12 May. For almost 2 months after it was performed, the Olefsky audit was not available to the people at Yale.

Others got wind of it, however. Rodbard called Olefsky at the University of Colorado in April and heard for the first time about the audit and the missing data. She wrote to Berliner demanding retractions. He, of course, did not see this letter until Monday, 12 May, but other people at Yale heard about Rodbard's demand. Olefsky told them about it by phone.

Back at Columbia, Tapley also started hearing rumors, and he unsuccessfully tried to reach Berliner at Yale to find out what was going on.

The transcontinental rumor mill was churning away. Researchers at the National Institutes of Health, Harvard, Colorado, and Columbia kept hearing rumors about Felig's laboratory at Yale that were getting more and more bizarre. Retractions. Destruction of data. Data falsification. Plagiarism. Felig at this time was already spending 2 days a week at Columbia, trying to organize his department and prepare for the official start of his appointment in June. He realized that a major session where rumors would fly thick and fast was coming up—the national clinical meetings to be held in Washington, D.C., during the second week of May. Felig thus met on 7 May with five senior professors in Columbia's department of medicine. He told them of the results of the first audit, of the missing data, and that the Olefsky audit had taken place. He also told them that any inquiries at the upcoming Washington meetings should be answered with candor.

After this meeting, one of the professors said that for data not available it would be best to send letters of retraction. Felig agreed, and said he had already reached the same conclusion. Again, as was the case with Tapley, and possibly because of the limited details made available, none of these professors told officials at Columbia about their conversations with Felig.

In June, Felig officially began his appointment as chairman of medicine at the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons.

The beginning of the end came in July. Marks, who had been out of the United States for almost 1 month, returned to New York on Sunday, 20 July. Back at Columbia the next day, he heard the rumors and took swift action. He spoke to I. S. Edelman, chairman of the department of biochemistry, who in turn called Dean Berliner at Yale on 22 July. Berliner, an old friend, told Edelman his version of the Soman-Felig story, and offered by way of further explanation to send a copy of a letter he had written to Rodbard. Edelman suggested that Berliner send it directly to Marks. After the phone call, Berliner re-read the letter and "realized that it referred to a number of earlier exchanges and its meaning would be quite unclear without them," he wrote to Marks on 23 July. Berliner thus enclosed some 26 letters and pieces of documentation relating to the whole affair. He did not, however, enclose the two thick manuscripts showing the pla-

giarism. This packet turned out to be a time bomb.

The documents arrived on Friday, 25 July, and a six-man faculty committee was immediately formed to look into the affair.* Four of the six had been on the search committee that had originally nominated Felig. Four of the six had heard nothing about the problems back at Yale during the selection process. Says Henrick H. Bendixen, chairman of the committee: "Many people were upset about being left out."

Now, for the first time, administrators at Columbia learned about the battle for priority, the plagiarism, the missing data books, the year-long delay in the investigation. On Friday, 1 August, 1 week later, the committee asked Felig to resign.

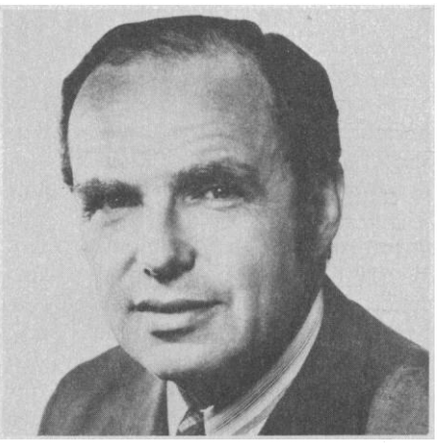
The charges in their seven-page, single-spaced indictment are numerous, but they can be boiled down to four major points. Felig should not have refereed in late 1978 the Rodbard manuscript (see *Science*, 3 October, p. 38). Felig failed to conduct his own investigation of Soman's data as soon as Rodbard's charges had been leveled in early 1979. Felig should not have brought Soman to Columbia in January 1980 as a candidate for an assistant professorship. Felig failed to communicate all the problems with Soman to officials at Columbia. This last point was considered by many members of the committee to be the most important. "Serious misdeeds were a given," says Edelman. "My concern was how he handled them, whether the management of the problems was such that we could give Phil a vote of confidence.

After receiving the committee's report, Felig over the weekend fired off a nine-page letter of rebuttal. He had been honest and forthright about telling Columbia every *significant* detail about the affair, he wrote. The committee had not considered all the facts. They dismissed his 7 May meeting with the department of medicine in a single sentence. They downplayed his 27 February meeting with Tapley, describing it as a "phone call" and alluding to only a few of the facts that were conveyed. Hindsight revealed how extensive an investigation of Soman should have been made, he continued, but in February 1979, when Rodbard first charged that the study had not been done, Felig had refuted those charges by getting Soman's data sheets. (Whether or not the study was done is still in doubt. See *Science*, 3 October.) It was appropriate, moreover, to bring Soman to Columbia in January 1980 for at that time Soman's only known impropriety was his having lifted some 60 words from Rodbard's manuscript. "The committee's report," he wrote, "appears to have been drawn in a manner to justify a recommendation totally uncalled for and unwarranted."

A battle over these issues still rages between Yale and Columbia, and probably will for some time. The committee should have looked at the manuscripts, says Yale. Plagiarism is plagiarism, Columbia retorts. Unstated in all the formal charges that Columbia leveled at Felig lurks one that, for better or worse, Edelman puts this way. "When you don't have the instinct to do the right thing," he says, "to associate with the right people, well, that's the difference between a winner and a loser."

The verdict of Columbia is in, and the principals have been digging through the debris, looking for a moral to the story. "It didn't seem possible," says Felig, "but institutions can get caught up in mass hysteria without regard for the facts or who can be hurt." Felig's only verbalized regret is that he did not check Soman's data when the charges were first leveled. Other than that, he feels he did no wrong. Berliner sees a slightly larger picture. "He should have kept a closer eye on what went on in his lab. We're all guilty of this, but you tend to pay more attention to a very junior person rather than the person who has their own support [as Soman did]."

The potential effects of the affair are also on the minds of many. At Columbia, Bendixen sees the review of candidates as being much more vigorous in the future. "Search committees used to ask polite and gentlemanly questions. Now all that will change. We're in the eyes of the public. If there are skeletons in a closet, they've got to come out. Search committees will not rest until they have asked some very hard questions. It used to be phone calls from dean to dean. No more. That obviously didn't answer all the questions."



Paul A. Marks

Heard rumors about plagiarism, destruction of data, and retraction of a dozen papers.

"A man's career has been shattered," says Samuel Thier, chairman of medicine at Yale. "But what has he really done wrong? Of what is he really guilty?"

The subtle effects of the Yale imbroglio might never be measured, but they will be there nonetheless. Senior researchers, for instance, may hesitate a bit in the future before signing a paper not carefully checked out. To the extent that this inhibits team research, such hesitation would prove unfortunate. Conventional wisdom holds that rewards for good research go not only to the junior worker who puts in most of the sweat but also to the idea person, to the one who dreams up the problem and sometimes the method. This was the basis of the relationship between Soman and Felig, in particular for the insulin binding study. Soman had his own financial support and did his own research. Felig supplied the ideas, apparently back in 1976. The rewards came in 1980 when Soman and Felig published their paper in the *American Journal of Medicine*.

That paper, however, landed Felig in hot water and ultimately led to a serious setback in his career. His trust of Soman, some would say his intellectual neglect of Soman, turned back on Felig and cut deep. The fabric of the reward system of coauthorship was torn. To the extent that there are other Somans at large in the labs, doctoring data, the incident stands as a threat and a warning.

—WILLIAM J. BROAD

*H. H. Bendixen, chairman of anesthesiology and chairman of the committee; I. S. Edelman, chairman of biochemistry; A. Garcia, chairman of orthopedic surgery; H. S. Ginsberg, chairman of microbiology; K. Reemtsma, chairman of surgery; S. Spiegelman, director of the institute of cancer research.