

# Not Wicked, Perhaps, but Tacky

I thought I might write an editorial about research ethics, because that subject has been much in the news of late. I quit—not because there aren't problems in that area, but because my attention was diverted to recent events of a somewhat different kind. These don't quite rise to the level of stark transgressions against standards, but they involve bad taste and thus help condition the public view of how science is conducted. With some help from my colleagues at *Science*, I decided to list some recent actions or events that qualify as tacky.

First place goes to the regrettable tendency of some groups or institutions to bolster their stock by making extravagant claims in the media or in the non- (or minimally) peer-reviewed literature. It's not a new problem; an account appropriately titled "Cloning by press conference" [*New England Journal of Medicine* **302**, 743 (1980)] described how Biogen hyped its stock in the 1970s. For anyone who thought that sort of thing might be over, the hyping of real cloning has been a splash of cold water. The companies that are touting the current feasibility and safety of cloning people, and are moving ahead with volunteers, have pushed Congress to the brink of legislation that could stifle other kinds of medical progress in this country. That's tackiness with a vengeance.

Refusal to share materials used in a published experiment is not a sin that journals (or anyone else) can punish effectively. But it is a particularly tasteless exercise of scientific competitiveness, and it is reaching epidemic proportions. Some researchers have been using selective boycotts: You get their cell lines only if you're from a country they like. And we also learn (Nick Wade, *New York Times*, 6 August 2002, p. D1) that scientists in an important subdiscipline of environmental science think that refusal to share algal strains is "a common practice in our field." "Everybody does it" is a familiar excuse, but it's still tacky.

The exchange of materials has been made even more difficult by the institutionalization of Material Transfer Agreements (MTAs): paperwork required by universities and industries to accompany the cells, reagents, etc. Not only is this helping to shrink the "knowledge commons" that was once an academic feature, the MTAs may contain provisions that act as deadfalls. Investigator at A reads B's paper, likes it, gets his cell line. A does a nice experiment and publishes the results; C asks for A's cells, but A then learns that B's MTA (which of course he had been too busy to read) prohibited redistribution to scientists in industry. C complains to the journal that published A's paper, but it can't do much about this perfectly predictable but tacky result.

Finally, we just have to list a development foisted on the community by one of our well-known authors. In their report of the sequence of the human genome [*Science* **291**, 1304 (2000)], Craig Venter and colleagues describe the "ethical rules governing donor selection to ensure gender and ethnic diversity" in their DNA donor sample. They used an Institutional Review Board and asked for and got a Certificate of Confidentiality from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "to protect the privacy of the individuals who volunteered to be donors." Those provisions were compromised when Venter told reporters that much of the DNA sequenced was his. Anything that has the look of a publicity stunt or of self-interest takes away from the credibility of the process and the reputation of the scientific endeavor. Venter's announcement has been ignored by most commentators, who have tended to view it as another sample of the hyperbole that came to characterize the Genome Wars. Perhaps because we published the paper, we take it a little more seriously. At the least, it was a tacky start for someone establishing an institute dealing with, among other things, bioethics issues.

So what we have here is a growing list of behaviors that, taken together, exemplify the gradual retreat from generosity and straight dealing in a community that is usually known for those qualities. Perhaps the core element of "tacky" in these examples is that they all eat away at the sense of community, shared understanding, and public trust that are crucial to science.

Donald Kennedy

<sup>2</sup>**tacky** \takē\ *adj* tackier; -est

[*tacky* (a low-class person)] (1883)

**1 a:** characterized by lack of good breeding: **COMMON b:** SHABBY, SEEDY **2 a:** marked by lack of style or good taste: **DOWDY b:** marked by cheap showiness: **GAUDY**

*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*