

## SCIENTISTS AND REPORTERS

### Material from Dr. Howard Schneider's News Literacy Lectures from GRD-500 2009

**Case 1::** You are a graduate student working in the lab of a professor who is testing an anti-obesity drug on mice. The test is sponsored by the pharmaceutical company that developed the drug. The company and the professor have had a long and productive relationship. The professor was a principal investigator on one of the company's most lucrative products, a popular anti-reflux treatment. The company's funding pays several salaries in the lab, allowing the professor to pursue his personal research priorities.

In the current trial, the results initially look extremely promising. When mice are given the drug and placed on a high-calorie or even very-high-calorie diet, a substantial majority never become overweight. No side effects are apparent. The company holds a press conference to announce this encouraging news, with the professor participating. The company's stock gets a boost. Not long afterward, you begin to notice that the second generation of mice – mice whose mothers or fathers had taken the drug – are dying young in abnormally large numbers. Eventually, you see that only 20% of the second generation survives to adulthood. Those that do reach adulthood are sterile.

You have been filing reports with the professor, but getting no response. (You seldom see him because he's a busy man.) Then you notice an announcement online that the company is sponsoring a weekend "research update" for doctors at a resort in Florida. Among the featured speakers is your professor, who is scheduled to talk about the obesity drug, which is billed as "a highly promising obesity-prevention measure that may rewrite the rules of fitness in the next decade."

You meet with the professor. You stress that the second generation of mice has died and you express your concern that the trial is being inaccurately portrayed. The professor says he understands your concern, but there is no conclusive evidence that the obesity drug was responsible for the deaths. Further testing, he says, is necessary. In any case, he has informed the company of the results. Under the terms of the trial contract, the company controls release of the results and he reminds you that all employees have signed non-disclosure agreements.. "How we handle this is important for both our careers – yours and mine," the professor says. He mentions that he is being interviewed next week on the Today show, as part of a week's worth of programming on obesity.

A reporter from a major newspaper is scheduled to do a story on the drug. Do you call him, disclose your concerns and slip him copies of the records that show abnormally high death rates among the second generation of mice? Why?

You are the reporter. Do you agree to withhold the name of your source--even go to jail to protect him—since he would be violating the non-disclosure agreement if he is quoted by name?

**Case #2:** You are a graduate student in the lab of a professor doing research into probiotics, the use of microorganisms to improve health. A reporter comes to do a feature on the lab and spends several days observing its work and chatting with you and others who work there, as well as with the professor. A few days later, the reporter calls and asks to meet with you. Over a cup of coffee, he says that an unnamed source in the lab has told him that the professor is secretly working with anthrax in the lab. The lab is not equipped to safely handle anthrax and, as far as you know, no research into anthrax is supposed to be going on. The reporter is seeking confirmation from a second source; if he gets it, he intends to write the story. He asks you if you would be willing to help. The reporter implies that the professor may be engaged in illegal activity and may even be intending to use the anthrax as a weapon. He also says that his unnamed source is concerned that the anthrax could be a danger to lab workers, or even to the wider university community.

You tell the professor you've heard a rumor she may be working with anthrax. She denies it, telling you she is working with *bacillus subtilis*, a harmless bacteria that resembles *bacillus anthracis*. Perhaps someone got them confused. Over the next few weeks, you investigate on the sly and you satisfy yourself that the professor is, in fact, experimenting with anthrax. When you confront the professor, she reveals that she is doing the research as part of a classified Department of Defense contract on biological warfare options against enemy nations. As far as she knows, it is the first such contract ever at the university. She says any disclosure of the secret research would be illegal. Meanwhile, the reporter has been calling you every couple of days, still seeking confirmation.

What do you do? Why?

If you are the reporter, do you publish the story even though it is a crime for a source to disclose classified information and government officials say any disclosure would tip off enemy researchers?

Do you keep it secret even though the work may endanger the public?

**Case #3:** You are a microbiologist working in the laboratory of a large city hospital. In recent years, because of budget cuts, care at the hospital has declined, in the opinion of many of the staff. Admissions are up 70 percent in three years – largely because two nearby hospitals have folded – but the number of doctors and nurses has not been increased. Patients often spend unnecessary days in the hospital because tests and procedures have not been ordered in a timely fashion. Housekeeping has been reduced and certain parts of the hospital often seem dirty, and smell of urine. At a time when there is a growing emphasis nationwide on sanitation and hand-washing to prevent hospital infections, the wall-mounted Purell dispensers, intended for staff hand-washing, stay empty for weeks before being filled. Hospital-acquired infections have risen. Conditions are particularly dire on the psychiatric ward, where patients frequently are put in physical restraints (ie, strapped to their beds), in violation of state health regulations. Meanwhile, the hard-working, little-known directors of the two largest departments, the department of medicine and the department of surgery, were replaced last year with big-name physicians who brought with them large NIH grants. The new chiefs seldom seem to be on the premises running their department; instead, because they spend a lot of time consulting for the government, attending scientific meetings and doing their own research.

Some staff at the hospital, very upset at the declining conditions, tell you that they have gone to the newspaper to expose what is happening. You learn that one mid-level administrator has arranged for a reporter to work undercover in the hospital as part of the reporting process. From various hints, you think you know who this person is – she’s working in the dietary department, delivering meals to patients all over the hospital. You are very concerned about the problems in patient care in the hospital, but you are also concerned about the possible violations of patient privacy that an undercover reporter might commit. In fact, one source slips the reporter copies of records involving several suspicious patient deaths. Release of the information is clearly in violation of HIPPA regulations.

What do you do?

You are the reporter. In pursuing the story, five nurses tell you they have been the victims of sexual harassment and abuse by the top-rated heart surgeon at the hospital. On one occasion, a young nurse tells you that she was sexually attacked in the doctor’s office. They provide detailed times and places of the alleged attacks. But the nurses say they are reluctant to come forward by name, for fear of losing their jobs. They urge you to do a story before more women are harmed. They say you can quote them, as long as you protect their identities. You contact the doctor? He says that he “will not dignify the charges with a comment.” Do you do a story? Why? Do you take any other course of action?