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National Center for Natural Products Research

Office of the Director

A Division of The Research Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences, School of Pharmacy

June 19, 2014

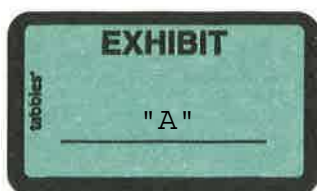
Fazlul Sarkar, PhD
13926 Knollview
Plymouth, MI 48170

Dear Dr. Sarkar:

As we discussed a few days ago, on 7 June 2014, I received a series of emails forwarded anonymously from PubPeer.com, containing several posts regarding papers from your lab. These were also sent at about the same time to Dr. Kounosuke Watabe, Associate Director of Basic Sciences for the Cancer Institute at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. I learned yesterday that several were sent on the weekend of 14 June to Dr. David Pasco, Assistant Director of the National Center for Natural Products Research. I am not sure where else these may have been sent.

These posts raised questions about a number of papers published by your team based upon research performed in your laboratory, papers for which you are the senior author. As you can imagine, these questions are not something I can ignore, as much as I would like to. And Dr. Watabe has the same dilemma. The purpose of this letter is to advise you in writing of the status of our deliberations on what we see as a very grave situation.

On November 18, 2013, on one of your interview visits, you disclosed to me and Dr. Vijayakumar, Director of the Cancer Institute, that an anonymous accusation of research misconduct had been raised at Wayne State University – by someone “out to get you” - and that an investigation was underway. You identified to us two papers at issue, and you shared errata or corrections that have been published in connection with those two papers. These were: 1) one figure where two gel blots representing different conditions had been duplicated, and 2) one figure where “pasting” of two independent gels occurred, but was not clearly indicated. You described those two as relatively minor and inadvertent errors, occurring 5-6 years apart.



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You advised me that the investigation was ongoing, and that others of your papers would be evaluated carefully during the investigation. You led me to believe that there were no substantive additional issues beyond these two, minor errors. You provided me the contact information for the responsible person at WSU Office of Research, and encouraged me to contact him, and I did so. As is understandable, no specific information about your case or its status was disclosed to me.

Some of my colleagues and I reviewed many of your papers and the overall body of your work, and we did not detect any grounds for serious concern. Based upon this review and in reliance upon your description of the limited nature of the issues, I decided to move ahead in our attempts to recruit you. I carried your case to the Dean, the Vice-Chancellor for Research and Sponsored Programs, the Provost, and even to the Chancellor, reassuring them based upon my review and in reliance upon your description of the issues that there was no evidence of serious concerns. I really put my own credibility on the line in this matter.

I am troubled that you did not share with me at that time the scope of the concerns reflected, the nature of the allegations, or the number of additional papers about which specific, similar accusations had been raised. It was only on receiving the anonymous emails from PubPeer.com that I saw the potential for a more pervasive problem, with questions raised on that website (PubPeer.com) as far back as October 2013, and with as many as 40 papers at issue. It is also disconcerting that in our many conversations over the last several months to discuss your potential employment here and move to Oxford, you failed to disclose that additional errata were issued for two papers in April of this year.

I have performed a preliminary review, and although I am by no means clear on all of the PubPeer.com challenges, several of the PubPeer.com criticisms appear to be valid and quite serious. The multiple instances of duplication of blots and cell monolayer images - which should represent different experiments or different treatments - suggest a very troubling pattern. Dr. Watabe, who also received the anonymous PubPeer.com messages, performed his own review independent of mine, and similarly found cause for serious concern. His evaluation corroborates the suggestion that multiple papers include duplicated images of gels or cell cultures, and such figures were purported to represent different experimental conditions. It seems that one - or more - of your group have done this rather repeatedly. Your email to me today does not address the issue of repeated inappropriate duplication of images, or suggest how it could be explained. These are not matters that will be rectified with a few published errata.

I have tried to imagine some set of facts that would explain this troubling pattern, but no explanation is apparent to me. Absent some extraordinary facts or circumstances unknown and unavailable to me, it seems to me that this pattern of duplicated images may be judged by a formal investigation as multiple incidents of falsification, and our Director of Research Integrity and Compliance concurs.

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At this point, we cannot go forward with an employment relationship with you and your group. With these allegations lodged in a public space and presented directly to colleagues here (I am not sure of the scope of the anonymous distribution), to move forward would jeopardize our research enterprise and my own credibility. Only when you have satisfactorily responded to and resolved these questions presented on PubPeer.com could we reconsider going forward.

One of the reasons we have reached this conclusion is that if you come here before these issues are fully resolved, the University of Mississippi would not be in a position to investigate the allegations. We do not have access to the data, lab records, or personnel that would be required to exonerate you, even if the facts supported such a conclusion. In sum, the only venue for you to clear-up any allegations is Wayne State. If there are facts that would resolve the research integrity concerns, moving here without resolution from Wayne State would impede your long-term research productivity and effectiveness.

Thus, if you remain interested in a future employment relationship, please provide a timeline describing when you learned of each of the concerns raised on PubPeer.com and describing any other concerns that have been raised in any other context. Please also provide any general or specific responses or explanations regarding these allegations that will explain how these duplications have occurred. Please also provide us written permission for the Wayne State research integrity officer to share the details and results of the Wayne State investigation with the University of Mississippi. We would like to learn how many of the matters raised on PubPeer.com have been the subject of the investigation, whether other concerns have been raised as a part of the investigation, any findings from the investigation committee, any sanctions from your deciding official, and the timetable for the steps that have not been completed.

I am truly sorry that it has come to this point, and I recognize the dilemma this creates for you, but we are also facing a serious dilemma for our entire research operation and University community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'L Walker', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Larry Walker, Ph.D.
Director, NCNPR