

OPEN LETTER - TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN March 16, 2011

We, the signatories, were dismayed to learn that our esteemed colleague, Professor Silvia Bulfone-Paus (Professor and Chair, Dept. of Immunology and Cell Biology, Borstel Research Center, Germany, and Professor of Immunobiology, University of Manchester, UK) recently has become embroiled in an affair of scientific misconduct that has attracted national and international attention.

This affair centers around evidence that two senior post-doctoral research fellows, who had worked in Silvia Bulfone-Paus' laboratory for about a decade, have systematically and covertly manipulated or duplicated data in an entire series of papers published by the Bulfone-Paus lab, mainly between 1999 and 2005. All evidence that has become available so far suggests that this couple acted in isolation and secretly. These systematic manipulations did not affect the main results, key concepts and conclusions of the publications in question, many of which have since been independently confirmed by other investigators. Yet, these manipulations sufficed to necessitate the retraction of 12 scientific papers.

In this context it is important to note that Professor Bulfone-Paus is widely regarded as an outstanding and brilliant scientist whose efforts have greatly advanced over the past decade our understanding of interleukin-15 biology. She has published over 80 other peer-reviewed papers in excellent journals, including papers in *Nature Medicine* and *Immunity* which are untouched by the current affair. She is the leader of a large academic department and is regarded as an outstandingly innovative scientist amongst her peers. It is very unfortunate that this gifted and motivated scientist was betrayed by her own trusted co-workers over such a long period of time. Professor Bulfone-Paus herself has repeatedly and publicly acknowledged that she fully accepts her personal responsibility as principal investigator for not having carefully scrutinized each and every data figure presented to her by these two post-docs before publication for any evidence of manipulation and duplication.

However, during the entire period of her close collaboration with these trusted senior post-docs, she never had any reason to suspect that such a level of scrutiny would have been well-advised or essential. Moreover, we have learned that during numerous internal lab meetings and seminars at the Borstel Research Center, no colleague ever voiced suspicions of manipulation, duplication, or misconduct, including during international conferences where the figures which contain manipulations/duplications (mainly in controls) were first presented to the scientific community. Moreover, all of the incriminated papers have been carefully studied and extensively cited by numerous investigators world-wide, without any suspicion of manipulations/ duplications ever having been voiced over about a decade, i.e. until the end of 2009.

We the undersigned scientists are even more dismayed to learn that a recent official investigation run by the Borstel Research Center concluded that Professor Bulfone-Paus carries the same level of personal responsibility as the two post-docs who had perpetrated these manipulations. While this investigation was going on, a vicious anonymous smear campaign was launched against her, fed with information by insiders from within the Borstel Research Center. This campaign even extended to her husband who has co-authored many of her papers.

On the basis of this misguided assessment, the supervisory committee of the Borstel Research Center (chaired by Dr. C. Andressen) and the directorate of the Center (Managing director: Prof. P. Zabel), have recently issued a joint declaration. In this, they summarize how these two steering bodies wish to respond to this affair: Silvia Bulfone-Paus' large independent academic department shall be reduced to a minimal laboratory group with a negligible research budget. Moreover, she will not be assigned any more students from the Centre. Also, in blatant disregard of her impressive record of achievements on behalf of the Centre, most of her colleagues are undisguised signalling to Professor Bulfone-Paus that they just want her to leave the Centre as soon as possible.

Beyond the personal tragedy of this individual case, we are deeply concerned about this development since it raises fundamental, generally important questions and concerns for all scientists. We are appalled that a victim of scientific fraud is now punished so harshly and unfairly for systematic, covert acts of scientific misconduct committed with intent by other researchers in responsible, senior post-doctoral positions, albeit within Professor Bulfone-Paus' lab. On the one hand, this violates all sense of natural justice. On the other, it raises the crucial question of what level of personal guilt is to be assigned to a principal investigator under whose supervision and ultimate responsibility a manuscript that contains manipulations/duplications is generated and published. Also, key here is what level of punishment is to be considered appropriate for supervisory inattention.

Considering that all manuscripts are subject to expert peer review, that all co-authors share at least some of the responsibility for a professional and truthful generation of the manuscript and that the final decision on the fate of each published manuscript lies in the hands of the journal's editor and his/her editorial team, it cannot be justified that the entire responsibility for covert manipulations/duplications committed by other individuals should solely rest on the shoulders of the principal investigator.

As scientists, we all must ask ourselves: How much personal guilt does a principal investigator accumulate, who objectively has no reason to harbour suspicion and therefore fails to scrutinize figures that are to be published under his/her name with the level of professional diligence that everyone advocates and that peers and the public expect? And what punishment is appropriate for any negligence in this respect?

It is lamentable enough that the current affair has enormously damaged the reputation of a brilliant scientist, in whose personal integrity the undersigned have full confidence. It is also deeply regrettable that all the many important findings and concepts with which Professor Bulfone-Paus has enriched her field over so many years of hard work (many of which have been confirmed by other laboratories world-wide) now have to be withdrawn. All this constitutes ample penalty of an insufficient supervisory performance. In this imperfect, but progressing human world, one can be reminded on the wisdom in the age-old, 'there but for the grace of God go I'.

The massive and unfair punishment that our esteemed colleague in Germany is currently being subjected to, damages science much more than it protects it from future misconduct by others.

This raises serious concerns, and must not be tolerated.



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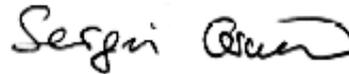
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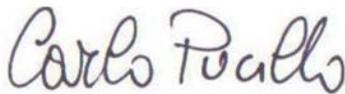
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*"This is a vicious, unjust affair.
Please put my name on the letter as well,
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