Promoting Responsible Conduct: Striving for Change Rather Than Consensus
Commentary on "Ambiguity, Trust, and the Responsible Conduct of Research" (F. Grinnell)

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INTRODUCTION

Although I know him only through his writing, Fred Grinnell and I seem to have a lot in common. We both are biological scientists in related areas of research. We both are concerned about responsible conduct, and we are actively involved in trying to educate others about it—he longer than I (e.g., see his excellent The Scientific Attitude, now in its second edition¹). And a few years ago we both were asked to prepare documents on scientific ethics, he for the American Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ASBMB), and I for the Society for Neuroscience (SFN).

Yet, despite those similarities, the two documents that we produced are quite different. To begin with, Grinnell and his colleagues have produced a 400 word code, whereas our committee wrote a 1,350 word set of guidelines². This essay concerns the extra 13,100 words, and describes two rather distinct approaches to the development of recommendations regarding responsible conduct in research.

GRINNELL'S INITIAL ASSUMPTIONS

In describing codes of ethics, Grinnell alludes to a distinction made by Mark Frankel, of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, that such codes can be “aspirational, educational, or regulatory.” Grinnell goes on to write that it was decided at the outset that the ASBMB code “should aim primarily to be aspirational and definitely not regulatory.” He cites three reasons for this decision. First, he and his

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¹ Actually, the difference is even greater than that, for, although the ASBMB code deals with a broad range of issues, the SFN code is confined to those topics that relate to the communication of research results.

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colleagues wanted to achieve a broad consensus and assumed that it would be easier to
do that with an aspirational rather than a regulatory code. Second, they wanted to
promote discussion—but not controversy. Third, they wanted to avoid the possibility
that allegations of misconduct might be referred to the ASBMB which then might feel
required to investigate. Let me deal with these issues in turn, for I disagree with
Grinnell on each of them.

THE DISAGREEMENTS

Aspiration, education, and regulation

I think it is safe to say that Grinnell and I, as well as the ASBMB and the SFN, have a
similar long-term objective—to promote responsible conduct among the members of
our societies and among researchers in general. However, I believe that writing down a
set of aspirations will unfortunately have little or no impact on that objective. This is
because in my opinion the great majority of researchers simply will not find such
statements regarding ethical conduct to be meaningful. For better or worse, it takes
more to attract our attention.

Aspirations are often provided in the prefaces of books or Instructions to Authors
for research manuscripts. We typically skip over this material, in part because we know
that such statements deal with matters about which we all already agree and,
furthermore, will have little effect on our day-to-day lives. Indeed, the SFN guidelines
has a statement of aspiration, too, but it is the preface, not the entire document. That is
because we felt that something more was needed, a set of guidelines that dealt with
each of the Frankel categories: aspiration, education, and even regulation.

Some examples

It might be instructive at this point to consider three brief examples of ASBMB
statements that I feel need to be expanded. (Later, I will deal with a fourth example in
more detail.)

1. The ASBMB says that investigators are expected to “use funds appropriately”.
Who would disagree? But what does that mean in practical terms—can I use funds to
carry out studies that are not outlined in my grant proposal? If so, under what
circumstances? These are questions that will catch my attention because I must
confront them on a regular basis.

2. The code states: “Investigators will not report the work of others as if it were their
own.” Again, we will all agree, and yet we also need more guidance: Who is an
"investigator" in this context? Is my technician an investigator? Is the person who sent
me an antibody? How about the person who supplied the funding or made a critical
suggestion at a seminar I gave—if I do not list them as authors, am I reporting their
work as my own? Help me grapple with these everyday issues and you will have my
attention and, ultimately, influence my behavior.