

September 25, 2006

Dear Dr Bhan :

It has been brought to the notice of the Society for Scientific Values that the research group of Dr. Gopal Kundu, a Bhatnagar awardee from the National Centre for Cell Science, Pune, published at least two papers in the prestigious Journal of Biological Sciences in 2004 and 2005 by allegedly recycling the same strips of western blots to depict different proteins as indicated in the attached sheet. The identical appearance of not just the bands in some strips but also background noise signals (which ought to have been random) provides a sufficiently clear basis for a prima-facie case of misrepresentation and/ or fabrication of data . If proven , these are serious charges that reflect not only on all the authors of the papers in question, but also on the journal, the institution where the work was carried out, the funding agencies that funded such work, as well as on the prestigious Bhatnagar Prize and above all, the image of Indian science . Therefore, we feel a thorough investigation is called for.

We understand that while an initial internal enquiry found the authors prima-facie guilty, a subsequent external enquiry did not find any evidence against the authors and were therefore, exonerated. These inquiries, however, raise several questions such as :

1. Does the Director, NCCS, and the two enquiry committees that examined the case agree that there exists a clear basis for a prima-facie case, even if they do not agree on the evidence for it?
2. Whether one committee recommended retraction of the papers from the Journal of Biological Chemistry.
3. What necessitated the second enquiry committee, on what terms of reference, and what were their findings?.
4. What more did the second committee do, that was not done by the first committee, for eg., did it conduct forensic examination of the record books, published pictures etc?
5. Did the second committee acknowledge that there were some strikingly similar (if not identical) photographs in both the papers? On what basis did the Director, NCCS (or any other authority concerned) find the findings of the second enquiry more acceptable than the first
6. Whether the editor(s) of the Journal of Biological Chemistry was contacted for comments regarding the papers in question and what was the response.
7. Whether these and any other such publications submitted were considered for the Bhatnagar award conferred upon Dr. Kundu.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards

K L Chopra
President, SSV

Dr M K Bhan
Secretary, DBT

Case Summary:

Paper I: Rangaswami H, Bulbule A, Kundu GC.

Nuclear factor-inducing kinase plays a crucial role in osteopontin-induced
MAPK/

I κ B kinase-dependent nuclear factor κ B-mediated promatrix
Metalloproteinase-9 activation.

J Biol Chem. 2004 Sep 10;279(37):38921-35. Epub 2004 Jul 7.

Paper II: Rangaswami H, Bulbule A, Kundu GC.

JNK1 differentially regulates osteopontin-induced nuclear factor-inducing
kinase/

MEKK1-dependent activating protein-1-mediated promatrix metalloproteinase-9
activation.

J Biol Chem. 2005 May 13;280(19):19381-92. Epub 2005 Mar 9.

A careful visual examination of the figures published in both papers reveals the identical appearance of not only the bands in some strips, but also background noise signals (which ought to have been random) and provides critical clues to the prima-facie case.

1. The strips used in Fig. 1B of paper I and Fig. 2B in paper II are the same, but denote different proteins, NIK and MEKK1.
2. The strips used in Fig. 2A of paper I and Fig. 1A in paper II are the same, but denote different proteins, actin and MEKK1.
3. The same strip from Fig. 3 B (top panel from paper I) was also used for Fig. 1c in paper I, again denoting different proteins.
4. The strip in Fig. 3 B (top) are the same in both paper I and paper II.
5. The strips used in the lower panels of Fig 3 A&B are flip-flops of each other, though they represent the same protein.
6. Both the strips in the figure 7C of Paper I have been reused in fig. 6A of paper II. While actin is common to the bottom panel in both above cases, in the top panel, the same strip was used to denote ERK in one case and MEKK in another case, with different values.
7. The top panels of Fig. 6A and 8A of paper II use the same strip to denote upa and jun.

K L Chopra
President , SSV