



Journal of Medical Sciences

ISSN 1682-4474

science
alert

ANSI*net*
an open access publisher
<http://ansinet.com>

'Universal Standards' for Research Integrity May Have Unintended Consequences

ScienceDaily (Feb. 19, 2011) – The global scientific community is capable of policing its own behavior and should resist creation of a central oversight body to enforce 'universal standards' that may have unintended consequences, a physicist and director of the Energy Institute at the University of Texas at Austin said February 19.

Speaking at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science Without Borders meeting in Washington, D.C., Raymond L Orbach, Ph.D., singled out several elements contained in the "Singapore Statement of Research Integrity" (www.singaporestatement.org) approved last July at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity.

"While it is appropriate for scientists and researchers to examine the governance of international collaborations in science, the Singapore Statement conveys a 'top down' approach that holds strong potential for unintended consequences," Orbach said.

For example, the Singapore Statement calls on researchers 'to report to the appropriate authorities any suspected research misconduct ... and other irresponsible research practices that undermine the trustworthiness of research, such as carelessness, improperly listing authors, failing to report conflicting data, or the use of misleading analytical methods.' "Just exactly who are the 'appropriate authorities' to whom one should report?" Orbach asked in his remarks at the AAAS meeting.

"The thought of some central body with oversight responsibilities over 'carelessness' or 'use of misleading analytical methods' is frightening," he added. "The lack of precision in defining these 'irresponsible research practices' also could lead to the mischievous invasion of personal rights and responsibilities."

Orbach also objected to the notion that researchers have an ethical obligation 'to weigh social benefits against risks inherent in their work.'

"Scientific research should be free to follow scientific instincts, and not be obligated to weigh potential findings against someone's concept of 'social benefits,'" Orbach said.

"There is a good argument for stating the significance of research to a prospective funding agency, but this should be in the context of the relevant research program," Orbach continued. "In the broader context, who is to judge 'social benefit?'"

"The potential for abuse seems significant."

In the end, the scientific community is quite capable of spotting and dealing with fraudulent behavior within its own ranks, Orbach said.

"The integrity of our work is the best judge of our behavior."

The theme for this year's AAAS meeting -- Science Without Borders -- is particularly apt, as nations form relationships that increasingly blur traditional 'borders' and risk becoming entangled in ethical issues, Orbach concluded.

"While the issue of research integrity is vitally important, and should be addressed on a global scale, the edicts issued by oversight bodies may produce unfortunate and far-reaching consequences that could ultimately negate the very purpose the standards are intended to support."