

Bullying Researcher Loses £3.5 Million

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Scientific misconduct is a constant challenge to academic research progress. Not only plagiarism, false research claims and allegations of bullying have also crept in academia. Disciplinary action against one such claim of bullying brings the academic community into the limelight. Recently, the Wellcome Trust in the UK [implemented an unprecedented landmark policy](#) against bullying. Let us find out more about the incident and the policy.

Allegations Against the Cancer Researcher

Nazneen Rahman worked as an eminent scientist at the Institute of Cancer Research (ICR) in London. She had received awards previously for her contribution to medical

sciences. However, certain allegations came into light which tarnished her reputation to a great extent. The reports indicated that the geneticist [bullied peer scientists](#) and staff members at the ICR. In total, 45 former and current staff lodged a complaint against the researcher dated back 12 years. Following the investigation, professor Rahman resigned as head of genetics and epidemiology from the University of London. Besides the resignation, the funding agency, Wellcome Trust, revoked £3.5 million (USD 4.5 million) fund provided to her.

Bullying and Misconduct in Academia

The case represents a spectrum of the mounting concerns related to harassment and misconduct in cancer research. Recent investigations have spurred numerous strategies to take disciplinary actions against such allegations within US and German labs. The Wellcome Trust [introduced the anti-bullying rules](#) this year; Prof Rahman is the first accused to be removed. The rule intends to end serious and ongoing bullying and harassment in laboratories and create a healthy work environment.

Independent investigations into such claims as with Prof Rahman require more clarity. In this instance, however, the accused resigned prior to implementation of disciplinary actions. The independent investigation conducted at ICR deemed some of the allegations serious enough to warrant a disciplinary hearing. In response, Prof Rahman resigned, and the hearing did not take place.

The New Misconduct Policy

The pioneering anti-harassment and anti-bullying policy was implemented by the Wellcome Trust in London in June. Following which, an independent investigation was conducted into the bullying allegations reported by the staff at ICR. The Trust's policy is applicable on new grants and those already associated with a grant from 1 June. As a result of this policy implementation, the funding agency can [withhold funding](#) to accused researchers. In fact, under extreme cases, the sanctions could suspend funding for the entire organization.

Wellcome's Zero Tolerance to Bullying

The policy also bars Prof Rahman from applying for funding from Wellcome, for a period of two years. A spokeswoman for the ICR stated that an open and supportive work environment was essential in research to defeat cancer. The efforts made by the Wellcome Trust can, in this way, improve the culture of the scientific community.

Bullying is a misuse of power, intended at making others vulnerable, upset, humiliated or threatened. Bullying and harassment are types of conduct that directly harm the progress of research. The policy informs the organizations of the extreme measures that will be taken to [prevent such unethical behavior](#). It also highlights that both researchers and organizations must meet ethical standards in exchange of funding received for their study.

Change in Culture Practiced in Academia

There is another side to the story as well. Prof Rahman has supporters who describe a different outlook, indicating her ability to motivate and develop strengths. Scientific program manager at the ICR, Ann Strydom, corroborates that Rahman nurtured academic skills and provided a supportive work environment. Thus, the case with Prof Rahman indicates that allegations of bullying can [eclipse a high impact profile](#) alongside long-standing funding acquisitions.

Many researchers in biomedicine believe the policy sends the right message about addressing the academic culture in universities, while some doubt its effectiveness. Philip Maini, a biological mathematician at the University of Oxford, questions how effective such a policy will be in the long-term. The extreme pressures inherent in science to [bring in grants and publications](#) provides a fertile ground for bullying and harassment. The effectiveness of such anti-bullying measures will rely on the transparency practiced in institutions. Therefore, the conduct practiced in the scientific would reflect the actual effect of Wellcome Trust's breakthrough step.

Have you experience any such bullying in the laboratory? How beneficial do you think this Wellcome Trust's policy will be? Please share your thoughts with us in the comments section below.

Cite this article

Enago Academy, Bullying Researcher Loses £3.5 Million. Enago Academy. 2018/08/28. <https://www.enago.com/academy/bullying-researcher-loses-3-5-million/>