

HOME > SCIENCE > VOL. 212, NO. 4493 > CONGRESS TOLD FRAUD ISSUE "EXAGGERATED"

 NEWS & COMMENT




Congress Told Fraud Issue "Exaggerated"

WILLIAM J. BROAD [Authors Info & Affiliations](#)

SCIENCE 24 Apr 1981 Vol 212, Issue 4493 p. 421 DOI: 10.1126/science.212.4493.421

 5

    CHECK ACCESS



Congress Told Fraud Issue "Exaggerated"

Congress recently clashed with top federal administrators over the significance of fraud in biomedical research and whether penalties for data falsification are harsh enough. During 2 days of hearings, officials from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) denied the existence of widespread problems, but they also announced significant policy changes.

Most important is a relaxation of the normally tight lid that NIH officials keep on allegations of fraud. According to William F. Raub, an associate director at NIH, results of ongoing investigations will be shared in the future with the individual institute's national advisory councils and boards, which perform high-level review of grant applications. (By legislative mandate, the councils are made up of



Science officials called before Congress

Donald Fredrickson of NIH and Philip Handler of NAS

scientists, physicians, and lay members from outside the formal NIH network.) This is a sharp departure from past practice, as evidenced by the case of Marc Straus, a researcher at Boston University. Straus's research team submitted reports containing repeated falsifications, and he resigned under fire in 1978, insisting that he was the victim of a conspiracy by members of his 20-person staff. When Straus reestablished himself and applied for a new grant, officials at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) did not inform the 28-member National Cancer Advisory Board of the allegations against him. The board approved a \$1.32-million grant. When they later learned of the data falsifications at Boston University, the chairman and other members of the board criticized NCI officials for keeping them in the dark.

The congressional hearings, the first of their kind, were held in response to a rising national debate over the issue of fraudulent research (*Science*, 10 April, p. 137). They opened on 31 March and were conducted by the House science and technology subcommittee on investigations and oversight, chaired by Albert Gore, Jr. (D-Tenn.), a young third-term congressman.

The subcommittee came down on NIH officials for conducting never-ending investigations and for keeping the funding pipeline open to researchers charged with data falsification. Observed Robert S. Walker (R-Pa.): "It took 10 days for Boston University to investigate Straus and demand his resignation. Yet 22 months later you [NIH officials] are still giving him a grant."

NIH director Donald Fredrickson took the criticism in stride. "We will not allow allegations alone to bar somebody from continuing support in science," he said. "Of the dozen or so cases in the last 5 years, many are still under

adjudication. We are extremely cautious about blacklisting. If we moved carelessly and harshly, we could do more harm to the system of science than we could to an individual." Representative Harold L. Volkmer (D-Mo.) seemed to think the delay on Straus might be due to another factor. He kept asking witnesses if they knew where Straus worked before he went to Boston University. None did. Finally, Raub told Volkmer that Straus had served as an NIH clinical associate.

Implicit in much of the congressional criticism was the charge that the peer review system operates as an "old boy" network. Congressmen repeatedly marveled at the "trust" shown by NIH study sections for work that was later found to be obviously falsified.

The continuing NIH reply was that peer review of grant proposals was performed on the basis of technical merit. Further, NIH officials held that potentially damaging information concerning ongoing investigations or allegations of fraud should not be part of these evaluations. Asked why, Raub replied that researchers are presumed innocent until proved guilty. This raised a chorus of complaints from the lawyers on the congressional panel. Representative Bob Shamansky (D-Ohio) said that presumption of innocence was strictly a legal concept that applied to punishment, such as sending someone to jail, but that it was "singularly inappropriate . . . to inject it into a question of whether or not you give someone a grant." The "presumption of innocence" rule was further challenged when chairman Gore asked whether John Long, a researcher who has admitted to falsifying data, could hypothetically still be eligible for NIH funding. Raub answered that there would be no automatic disqualification. This answer again raised eyebrows among the lawyers. "It seems to me," said Shamansky, "that if the man has confessed, he should not be considered worthy."

Although NIH officials conceded at the hearing that procedures for dealing with fraud were under review and that work was still needed, they denied that fraud is a significant problem overall. Fredrickson stressed that cases are few and that most are taken care of by the self-correcting nature of scientific inquiry. Philip Handler, president of the National Academy of Sciences, put it more bluntly, saying that the fraud issue is "grossly exaggerated" and should be handled internally by scientists. Handler also volunteered that he himself had encountered two cases of fraudulent research, a decade apart, at Duke University. "Both individuals left the institution and were never heard from within the world of science again. I cannot imagine what more we should have done."

Handler's denial of any significant problem was at times quite vigorous. When Gore asked whether many experiments were not replicated and thus not subject to scientific review for error and fraud, Handler drew a hard line. He would admit nothing of the sort, and during a 2-minute exchange forced Gore to rephrase the question in a variety of ways. Finally, in frustration, Gore turned to Fredrickson, who tactfully admitted that many experiments were not duplicated. Fredrickson also noted, however, that if an experiment "appears to have significance it will be repeated and retested in numerous ways."—WILLIAM J. BROAD

Get full access to this article

ScienceAdviser

Get the latest news, commentary, and research, free to your inbox daily.

SUBSCRIBE

NOT NOW

×

Reference

SCIENCE **212**: 137 (1981).

[CROSSREF](#) • [PUBMED](#) • [WEB OF SCIENCE](#) • [GOOGLE SCHOLAR](#)

eLetters (0)

eLetters is a forum for ongoing peer review. eLetters are not edited, proofread, or indexed, but they are screened. eLetters should provide substantive and scholarly commentary on the article. Embedded figures cannot be submitted, and we discourage the use of figures within eLetters in general. If a figure is essential, please include a link to the figure within the text of the eLetter. Please read our [Terms of Service](#) before submitting an eLetter.

[LOG IN TO SUBMIT A RESPONSE](#)

No eLetters have been published for this article yet.

Recommended articles from TrendMD

Another Congressional Look at Fraud

Barbara J. Culliton, *Science*, 1989

"Struck" by Fraud?

Paul de Sa, *Science*, 1996

Fraud Allegations

Henry H. Wortis, *Science*, 1988

Mammoth Fraud Exposed

Roger Lewin, *Science*, 1988

Action on Fraud

Phyllis Rubinton, *Science*, 1983

NOT MERELY AN "AMERICAN FRAUD." [↗](#)

Chinese Medical Association Publishing House, 1906

The Executive Committee [↗](#)

Chinese Medical Association Publishing House, 1920

The Constitution and By-Laws [↗](#)

Chinese Medical Association Publishing House, 1908

Meeting of the Executive Committee [↗](#)

MORRIS H. H., Chinese Medical Association Publishing House, 1915

What the financial statements say – or not - about fraud and corruption [↗](#)

Jeanine Poggiolini, CIGFARO Journal (Chartered Institute of Government Finance Audit and Risk Officers), 2023

Powered by **TREND MD**



ScienceAdviser

Get the latest news, commentary, and research, free to your inbox daily.

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

[NOT NOW](#)



A chemogenetic screen reveals that Trpv1-expressing neurons control regulatory T cells in the gut

BY YANGYANG ZHU, KIMBERLY A. MEERSCHAERT, *ET AL.*

Mechanism of PCNA loading by Ctf18-RFC for leading-strand DNA synthesis

BY ZUANNING YUAN, ROXANA GEORGESCU, *ET AL.*

Ecological roles and importance of sharks in the Anthropocene Ocean

BY SIMON DEDMAN, JERRY H. MOXLEY, *ET AL.*

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#) >

ScienceAdviser

Get the latest news, commentary, and research, free to your inbox daily.

SUBSCRIBE

NOT NOW



Sign up for ScienceAdviser

Subscribe to *ScienceAdviser* to get the latest news, commentary, and research, free to your inbox daily.

SUBSCRIBE >

LATEST NEWS

SCIENCEINSIDER | 3 AUG 2024

Deadlier strain of mpox spreads to multiple African countries

SCIENCEINSIDER | 2 AUG 2024

Senate bill would give NIH \$2 billion raise and crack down on harassers

NEWS | 2 AUG 2024

Sleep deprivation alters connections in the brain, mouse study finds

NEWS | 1 AUG 2024

‘Like magic.’ AI determines the structure of small molecule drugs and catalysts, even with fuzzy data

NEWS | 1 AUG 2024

News at a glance: Europe rejects Alzheimer’s drug, cancers rise in young Americans, and NASA finds a promising Mars rock

NEWS FEATURE | 1 AUG 2024

Is the pay-to-publish model for open access pricing scientists out?

ADVERTISEMENT

RECOMMENDED

NEWS & COMMENT | DECEMBER 1994

Imanishi-Kari case: ORI Finds Fraud

NEWS OF THE WEEK | MARCH 2001

Fallout From German Fraud Case Continues

NEWS & COMMENT | FEBRUARY 1989

Baltimore Cleared of All Fraud Charges

NEWS & COMMENT | MARCH 1991

NIH Finds Fraud in Cell Paper

ADVERTISEMENT

FOLLOW US



GET OUR NEWSLETTER

NEWS

- [All News](#)
- [ScienceInsider](#)
- [News Features](#)
- [Subscribe to News from Science](#)
- [News from Science FAQ](#)
- [About News from Science](#)
- [Donate to News](#)

COMMENTARY

- [Opinion](#)
- [Analysis](#)
- [Blogs](#)

AUTHORS & REVIEWERS

- [Information for Authors](#)
- [Information for Reviewers](#)

ADVERTISERS

- [Advertising Kits](#)
- [Custom Publishing Info](#)
- [Post a Job](#)

ABOUT US

- [Leadership](#)
- [Work at AAAS](#)
- [Prizes and Awards](#)

CAREERS

- [Careers Articles](#)
- [Find Jobs](#)
- [Employer Hubs](#)

JOURNALS

- [Science](#)
- [Science Advances](#)
- [Science Immunology](#)
- [Science Robotics](#)
- [Science Signaling](#)
- [Science Translational Medicine](#)
- [Science Partner Journals](#)

LIBRARIANS

- [Manage Your Institutional Subscription](#)
- [Library Admin Portal](#)
- [Request a Quote](#)
- [Librarian FAQs](#)

RELATED SITES

- [AAAS.org](#)
- [AAAS Communities](#)
- [EurekAlert!](#)
- [Science in the Classroom](#)

HELP

- [FAQs](#)
- [Access and Subscriptions](#)
- [Order a Single Issue](#)
- [Reprints and Permissions](#)
- [TOC Alerts and RSS Feeds](#)

ScienceAdviser

Get the latest news, commentary, and research, free to your inbox daily.

SUBSCRIBE

NOT NOW



