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Questions of interest

We thought we'd heard enough and written enough^{1,2} about Nancy Olivieri's dispute with Apotex, the Hospital for Sick Children (HSC) and the University of Toronto by the time the second report on this unseemly affair was released in July 2001. Commissioned by the Canadian Association of University Teachers, a body hardly less disinterested than the HSC, who appointed Arnold Naimark to prepare a report on the case in 1998, the 540-page Thompson Report kicked around the office for some time; we entertained the idea of using it as a doorstop. Both the U of T and HSC dismissed it with the assertion that they had moved past these issues.^{3,4} This response did not satisfy everyone, as Elaine Gibson and colleagues make plain in this issue (page 448).⁵

As Dean of Medicine David Naylor describes (page 453),⁶ the U of T has moved on, down the unexceptionable path of an internal audit of industry-sponsored research contracts. Naimark and his colleagues, after a pause of 6 months, have commented at length but rather unhelpfully on the Thompson Report, mainly to the effect that the 2 reports had different objectives.⁷ Neither the HSC nor the U of T participated in the Thompson Report. Nor did Nancy Olivieri and her supporters participate in the Naimark Review. The polarized findings of these inquiries, separated by a no man's land of disputed information and damaged reputations, demonstrate the obvious: the investigation should have been conducted by a third party whose disinterest was both real and evident.

In Denmark, the inquiry might have been referred to the Danish Committee on Scientific Dishonesty, a body chaired by a high court judge and comprised of representatives from academe, government, publicly funded research institutes and the medical profession. We need such a body in Canada. Last November, CMAJ and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research sponsored a meeting of editors of Canadian peer-reviewed health science journals to discuss publication ethics (see www.cma.ca/cmaj

/publicationethics). The editors of more than 20 journals decided to work together to promote more ethical research behaviour through the education of research trainees and to work toward establishing such a national body for research (and editorial) misconduct in Canada. The body should be configured to reflect the structure of the research community in this country and mandated to consider the public interest above all else.

Olivieri has been cast in the media as a female David standing up to a 3-headed Goliath, the motto of "academic freedom" emblazoned on her shield. The theme is interesting, even if the plot has become tedious, but it is dissatisfying that the central figure of the story, the study subject who volunteers in research, is mainly inferred. The safety of patients who participate in clinical trials, the validity of scientific findings, the transparency of vested interests and, yes, academic freedom, are issues of public interest more significant than the reputations of individuals and their institutions. If such a case were to erupt tomorrow, would a national body for research misconduct as proposed by the editors not better serve the interests of patients, research subjects and the public? — CMAJ

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