

Researcher Faces Prison for Fraud in NIH Grant Applications and Papers

In the most extensive scientific misconduct case the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has seen in decades, a researcher formerly at the University of Vermont College of Medicine in Burlington has admitted in court documents to falsifying data in 15 federal grant applications and numerous published articles. Eric Poehlman, an expert on menopause, aging, and metabolism, faces up to 5 years in jail and a \$250,000 fine and has been barred for life from receiving any U.S. research funding.

Scientists say the falsified data—including work in

for total cholesterol, insulin, resting metabolic rate, and glucose” were falsified or fabricated, said a statement Poehlman signed last week. In an effort to portray worsening health in the subjects, DeNino tells *Science*, “Dr. Poehlman would just switch the data points.”

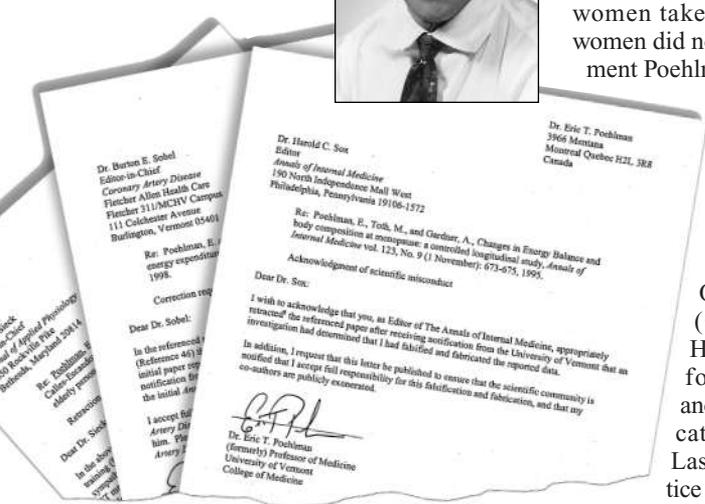
After DeNino filed a formal complaint, a university investigative panel looked into Poehlman’s research and uncovered falsified data in three papers. These included a much-cited 1995 *Annals of Internal Medicine* study that suggested hormone replacement therapy could prevent declines in energy expenditure and increases in body fat during menopause. In that paper Poehlman presented metabolic data on 35 women taken 6 years apart. Most of the women did not exist, according to the statement Poehlman signed. (In 2003 the paper was retracted.) Poehlman left Vermont in 2001, before the investigation ended, for the University of Montreal. He left there in January and now lives in Montreal.

A 2-year review by the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) at the Department of Health and Human Services found more falsified data in another dozen federal grant applications, ORI investigators said. Last week the Department of Justice announced that the total was 17,

and that NIH and the U.S. Department of Agriculture had given Poehlman \$2.9 million in grants based on fraudulent applications. In addition to pleading guilty to making a false statement on a federal grant application, Poehlman agreed to pay \$180,000 to settle a civil suit with the government. A plea hearing and sentencing are pending.

Colleagues say Poehlman’s work was extensive but did not affect underlying assumptions about how the body changes during aging. Richard Atkinson, editor of the *International Journal of Obesity*, said in an e-mail that removing Poehlman’s work may reduce the evidence that energy expenditure decreases across time with menopause, but “it does not invalidate the concept.” Judy Salerno, deputy director of the National Institute on Aging in Bethesda, Maryland, says his work “wasn’t the final answer.”

Journal editors say it’s hard to guard against such misconduct. A rigorous review process can do only so much, says Harold Sox, who became *Annals*’s editor in 2001: “You just have to trust the authors.”



Retractions. Eric Poehlman (shown in 1991 photo) has notified journals about 10 papers that required retractions.

10 papers for which Poehlman has requested retractions or corrections—have had relatively little impact on core assumptions or research directions. But experts say the number and scope of falsifications discovered, along with the stature of the investigator, are quite remarkable. “This is probably one of the biggest misconduct cases ever,” says Fredrick Grinnell, former director of the Program in Ethics in Science at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. “Very often [in misconduct cases], it’s a young investigator, under pressure, who needs funding. This guy was a very successful scientist.” Neither Poehlman nor his attorney returned calls from *Science*.

Poehlman, 49, first came under suspicion in 2000 when Walter DeNino, then a 24-year-old research assistant, found inconsistencies in spreadsheets used in a longitudinal study on aging. The data included energy expenditures and lipid levels for elderly patients. “[V]alues

A Numbers Game at NSF

Those upset that President George W. Bush proposed only a 2.4% increase in the 2006 budget for the National Science Foundation now have reason to believe NSF’s new director, Arden Bement, is on their side. But don’t ask him to talk about it.

Appearing 11 March before a House spending panel that handles NSF’s budget, Bement was asked how much the agency requested last fall in its 2006 budget submission to the White House. Most officials duck the commonly asked question, but Bement, known for his straight talk, decided to answer. “To my best recollection it was 15%,” he replied, a figure in keeping with an NSF authorization passed 3 years ago that would have doubled NSF’s budget over 5 years. The agency actually submits “several scenarios,” he told the panel, and this year the final request wound up “somewhere between the median and the low end.”

Asked later for details, however, Bement told *Science* that the number “was based on a fuzzy memory.” He declined to give the actual figure, citing “predecisional” negotiations with the Administration.

—JEFFREY MERVIS

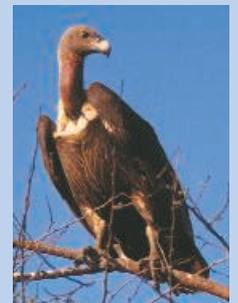
India to Outlaw Animal Drug

NEW DELHI—The Indian government has decided to phase out veterinary use of a painkiller implicated in the catastrophic decline of vultures on the subcontinent.

Officials are now asking farmers to replace diclofenac with alternatives, like ketoprofen and meloxicam, believed to be less toxic to the birds.

Vultures carry out an important function in the food chain. But their once-abundant numbers have dropped precipitously in the past decade, and studies in India, Pakistan, and Nepal have found the drug in dead vultures. “The only way of saving the vultures was to ban the use of the drug in animals,” says Asad Rahmani, director of the Bombay Natural History Society. The decision, announced last week by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, embraces a recommendation from the government’s National Board for Wildlife, which proposed a 6-month phaseout.

—PALLAVA BAGLA



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Science **307** (5717), 1851.

DOI: 10.1126/science.307.5717.1851a

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