MIT Hiring Controversy Sparks Faculty Fracas

Faculty members at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and neurobiologists elsewhere are in an uproar over a decision last month by an up-and-coming scientist to decline a position at MIT. Some scientists claim the incident reflects gender bias by a prominent faculty member, whereas others see it as simply a nasty case of academic politics. MIT’s president has apologized for the incident, which points to ongoing tensions among MIT’s fractious neuroscience teams and the university’s struggle to hire accomplished women.

Alla Karpova, a postdoctoral fellow at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York, was offered a job this spring as an assistant professor at MIT’s McGovern Institute, which specializes in brain and cognitive sciences. She declined the position on 24 June. A week later, 11 senior women faculty members wrote MIT President Susan Hockfield complaining that Susumu Tonegawa, head of the rival Picower Institute of Learning and Memory and a 1987 Nobel Prize recipient, “strongly opposed her recruitment” and that other professors and administrators could not assure her “that she was wanted and welcome at MIT.” Karpova has since accepted a post as an independent investigator at the new Howard Hughes Medical Institute Janelia Farm research campus in northern Virginia.

The letter goes on to warn that the incident has “damaged MIT’s reputation as an institute that supports academic fairness for young faculty and jeopardized our ability to attract the best scientists to MIT.” The authors urged Hockfield to apologize to Karpova and investigate the incident. “At stake are the career of a brilliant young scientist and the reputation of a great institution,” the letter concludes.

A separate letter to Hockfield and MIT Provost Rafael Reif from Stanford University neurobiologist Ben Barres, an MIT alumnus, made more explicit charges. “I’m tired of seeing women treated poorly at MIT,” he told Science. Describing conversations he says he had with Karpova and with MIT officials, Barres wrote that Tonegawa and science dean Robert Silbey “in essence advised her not to accept the offer.” Tonegawa and Silbey, who has said he’s “not happy” with the rate of hiring women science faculty members since he became dean, did not return phone calls and e-mails (Science, 21 April, p. 347, and 14 July, p. 171).

Tonegawa’s supporters at MIT, however, say that any suggestion of gender bias is absurd. “To portray it as such sets back the cause for women scientists,” states a 7 July letter to Hockfield from a half-dozen Picower Institute faculty members. Tonegawa is under no obligation to collaborate with anyone, they write, adding that he contacted Karpova “at her instigation.” But other sources familiar with the content of e-mails sent by the 68-year-old Tonegawa to the postdoc say his words went beyond the issue of collaboration and conveyed hostility.

Reif says that he will chair a committee to investigate both the Karpova affair and how neuroscience is organized at the university, adding that “a bit of tension seems to be underlying this set of events.” And on 17 July, Hockfield wrote the women faculty members that MIT apologizes to Karpova “for any misunderstanding.” The gender issue may be beside the point, says MIT biologist Nancy Hopkins, who chaired a 1999 committee on gender bias and who signed the 30 June letter. “Regardless of the specifics of this case, this shows exactly why it is challenging to hire outstanding women at MIT,” says Hopkins.

Karpova says she is “very much upset” over the publicity. “I am trying to move on with my life, to get back to doing science,” she says.

—ANDREW LAWLER

U.S. Panel Calls for Extra Review of Dual-Use Research

A panel set up to help the U.S. government prevent terrorists from misusing life sciences research has recommended that institutions and journals adopt formal procedures to pre-screen the publication of findings from such dual-use projects.

At a meeting last week, the 25-member National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB) unanimously approved recommendations from one of its working groups asking authors, institutional reviewers, and journal editors to carry out a risk-benefit analysis before deciding whether to publish results of dual-use research and in how much detail. “If you accept the fact that there is potential for science to be misused, then you could envision a situation where it might be necessary to withhold certain information from a paper,” says board chair Dennis Kasper, a microbiologist at Harvard University. Other points to consider would be whether to defer publication until a time when the benefits might outweigh the risks, and whether to limit access to the published material.

The board has yet to specify how campus officials might implement this approach or how federal agencies funding dual-use projects might ensure compliance with guidelines for prepublication review. More detailed recommendations will not be ready before NSABB’s next meeting in October, but several panelists suggested that the primary responsibility for oversight will likely fall upon institutional biosafety committees (IBCs), “which might need to be modified to include biosecurity experts,” Kasper says.

The process would likely involve the following: An institutional oversight committee, either the IBC itself or another body appointed by the university administration, would first review proposals from researchers to determine, based on answers to specific questions, whether their projects have potential for misuse. If a project were to meet the standard for dual use—which the board has defined in broad terms as research leading to knowledge that could be misapplied to threaten “public health, agriculture, plants, animals, the environment, or materiel”—the proposal would be flagged accordingly before being submitted to a federal agency for funding. Papers and presentations arising from the work would need to undergo review by the same oversight body or a different one. In addition, journal editors accepting such submissions would be encouraged to conduct similar reviews of their own. Authors would have the option of appealing institutional decisions to modify their papers or prevent publication.

Even so, says toxicologist Gary Miller, chair of the IBC at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, scientists are likely to balk at “prepublication screening” by institutional officials.

—YUDHIJIT BHATTACHARJEE