Harvard researcher nabbed for fraud

By Susan Hagadorn

A panel of professors found Harvard Medical School researcher Dr. John R. Darsee guilty of falsifying much of his research data over a year-long period.

Darsee's work, supported in part by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), was investigating the effects of various drugs in aiding recovery from heart attacks.

After harboring suspicion for three months, three of Darsee's colleagues brought their accusations to their laboratory chief, Dr. Robert A. Kloner, in May of 1981. Kloner asked to see the original data from the questioned experiments, and Darsee was later found falsifying it. Darsee justified his action, claiming he had already discarded the original data for the experiments.

Had it not been for a letter Darsee received in August 1981 from a co-worker, the situation might never have been revealed. The letter contained a list of experiments that Darsee had recently directed. Kloner went to the library and found the original data for the experiments. Darsee was later suspended from Harvard.

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The report, released last week, stated that Darsee falsified much of his data and did not notify the NIH of the scientific community until November, when NIH questioned discrepancies in its study. The Harvard panel was formed in December to investigate.

The MIT panel concluded that Darsee was guilty of falsifying much of his data during his second year at Harvard. The report also said that Darsee's retention at the laboratory during the investigation was justified because he was presumed innocent until proven guilty, and because he was subject to close supervision while the investigation was in progress.

The report also recommended that a committee of senior professors be formed as quickly as possible to deal with any future charges of similar dishonesty. The NIH panel formed to also investigate the situation has not yet reported its findings in the case.

MIT has no procedure to deal with such cases, said Provost Francis Low, because there has never been a need for one. "As far as I know, such things have not happened [at MIT]," he said. "Errors happen, and false hopes arise, but as far as I know, they get stopped in time." Former Provost Walter Rosenblith, Institute Professor, agreed that no comparable case has occurred at MIT in years, if ever.