Researcher perspectives on raising concerns: First results from the PRISM project

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Perspectives on Research Integrity in Science and Medicine

A Switzerland-wide study

Lack of empirical research on the topic

Funded by the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences

(PI: Dr. David Shaw)
Methodology

- Exploratory qualitative research study
  - All research universities across Switzerland
  - Medicine and life sciences
  - Three levels of seniority
- In-depth qualitative interviews and vignettes
- Recruitment of study participants
  - Newsletters of Life Science Switzerland, university mailing lists
Research questions

• What reasons or circumstances made it challenging for researchers to raise concerns about scientific misconduct or breaches in research integrity in their research/work environment?

• How can we build a research/lab/university culture which will encourage researchers to raise valid concerns without fearing negative career consequences?
Who participated in our study?

N = 33

- Medical sciences: 28
- Life sciences: 3
- Pharma Industry: 2

- Clinical research: 25
- Lab research: 8
Gender and seniority distribution

N = 33

- Junior: Male 3, Female 2
- Midlevel: Male 9, Female 8
- Senior: Male 10, Female 1
What reasons/circumstances made it challenging for researchers to raise concerns about scientific misconduct or breaches in research integrity in their research/work environment?
Reasons/Circumstances

- Seniority level
- Gender
- Fear of consequences for career
- Doctoral advisory committees consisting only of the main supervisor
- Extremely competitive research environment focused on output in terms of high impact publications
- Highly secretive & hierarchical research culture
How can we build a research/lab/university culture which will encourage researchers to raise valid concerns without fearing negative career consequences?
At level of research group

• Open and transparent research culture built on trust
• Encourage critique of methodology and analysis
• Difference between raising concerns and accusing someone
• Seniors set strong examples as role models
• PhD advisory committees with members from different research groups or other universities
• Establish procedures to escalate the concerns within the research group step-wise
At level of university

- Independent and neutral advisory committees where one could seek advice in confidential settings
- Make guidelines and procedures available at the university to address concerns visible, easily accessible and reliable
- Build anonymous online reporting system for breaches in RI similar to the reporting system for medical errors in hospitals
  - Aim is to improve the research environment and prevent future mistakes rather than punishing people
- Seniors set strong example through personal behaviour
Ombudsmen / RIOs

- How independent are these people?
- If the confidants for different faculties are mid level researchers, how likely are they to question their senior colleagues in response to concerns raised?
- Potential conflict of interest for the university when a high performing senior researcher is the concern
- How to minimize impact on careers yet ensure honest & transparent investigation of concerns of misconduct?
Limitations

• Self selection bias

• Low participation rates from
  • junior researchers

• Researchers from life sciences

• Not all universities in Switzerland are equally represented

• Reasons for rather limited participation by researchers are not fully understood
Next steps

• Follow-up survey study with participation from all Swiss universities
• Review of research integrity guidelines and mechanisms and procedures available for raising concerns across all Swiss universities
• Interviews with ombudsmen/members of RI commissions of Swiss universities and national funding agency
Thanks for listening!