

Qualia

Can rehab help scientists guilty of misconduct?

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Could remediation work for researchers who have committed scientific misconduct? A new program run by the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) aims to find out.

The program is called [RePAIR](#) (Restoring Professionalism and Integrity in Research), and according to [Nature](#), RePAIR is being tested on four scientists as we speak. The idea behind the program is that there are some cases of misconduct that don't warrant scientists' dismissal from their institutions but that do require some type of ethics training. RePAIR, which is led by Saint Louis University ethicist James DuBois, focuses on getting scientists to understand what they did wrong, providing them with skills in ethical decision making, and creating personal professional management plans that will (hopefully) prevent researchers from repeating past mistakes. Three things really stood out to me about this program as I read the Nature article.

First, the number of potential attendees for a program like RePAIR is staggering. According to the article, the ORI "received 419 allegations of misconduct at institutions in 2012 — nearly double the number in 2011" and DuBois found in his own survey that most US institutions were investigating between three and five cases per year. Of course, anyone who's read [Retraction Watch](#) knows that the number of cases has been going up—although it's unknown what role increased attention to these issues have played in identifying such cases. Either way, the rate of growth is quite concerning. We also don't know how many of these scientists would qualify for a program like RePAIR—a point I'll revisit later.

Second, RePAIR was developed with a \$500,000 grant from the NIH, and the three day course costs \$3000 per participant (this cost is paid by the individual or academic department and the amount is halved if an institution agrees to partner with the program). Some people in the comments on the online Nature article, as well as an ethicist interviewed for the story, question whether this money would be better spent developing preventative programs. DuBois himself responded in the comments with a link to an article showing that there is [no evidence that preventative responsible conduct in research programs work](#) to improve ethical decision making. In fact, preventative programs may actually make things worse—this surprised me.

The last thing that stood out to me about the article—but did not exactly surprise me—was the ire of some of the comments left by scientists in response to the RePAIR program. At a time when grant funding is cut down to the bone, a program like this (and its cost to develop) is a little hard to swallow—especially if you're a researcher who can't get a research grant and yet cannot even fathom crossing the line into scientific misconduct. I imagine the program has gotten a lot of heat; DuBois has written his own [defense](#) of the operation. I think the oversupply of

biomedical PhDs also adds to this frustration, with people questioning why we are remediating scientists when there are so many others that could take their places.

Part of the problem may be that it is unclear what types of misconduct we're talking about here (the [FAQs](#) state the program is for "RePAIR was designed for researchers who have engaged in research wrongdoing or have repeatedly failed to comply with policies and procedures"). A researcher who failed to disclose a conflict of interest (an example given in the article) or self-plagiarized may be seen much differently (i.e. more likely to be rehabilitated successfully) than someone who completely fabricated data.

I'll be curious to see how this program works. I'm generally pro-remediation, but I do understand and sympathize with the other researchers' concerns. For most scientists it is beyond comprehension to knowingly commit any kind of misconduct—science is the pursuit of the truth, so lying or omitting important information is unfathomable. I also think that perhaps the ORI needs to look into preventative programs more closely to find out if they could be changed to make them successful. At the very least, I imagine they could prevent cases where beginning students did not know they were committing misconduct—such as overzealous photoshop use or plagiarism.