

Many “Acid Bath” Stem Cell Investigators Are Investigated

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It seems as if everyone is being investigated.

On April 1, a Riken Institute investigative committee [charged](#) [1] Harvard University/Riken stem cell researcher Haruko Obokata with falsification and fabrication of images in a January [Nature](#) [2] paper. In that paper, she had reported reprogramming ordinary cells into stem cells just by stressing them with coffee-mild acid.

The alleged falsification—first discovered by anonymous Japanese scientist/bloggers—involved cutting and pasting gel images supposed to prove her starting cells were mature. The alleged fabrication involved false differentiation images supposed to prove her final cells were stem cells. (The latter images were outright taken from a completely different experiment, said the committee.)

On April 9, Obokata appealed the committee’s ruling.

The committee retired to ponder.

But in the middle of the pondering: more trouble. Shunsuke Ishii, head of the committee charging Obokata with image falsification and fabrication, was charged himself (first by anonymous Japanese scientist/bloggers, then others) with errors in a 13 August 2007 *Oncogene* paper of his own. The problem: cutting and pasting gel images. He explained this occurred so the order would match explanations in the text. On April 26, he offered to resign.

On April 28, still more trouble. Nobel prize-winning induced pluripotent stem cell (iPSC) researcher Shinya Yamanaka held a press conference in which he apologized for a problematic image in a paper of his from 2000. He had not held onto notes

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from the scientist responsible for the problem. He was cleared by his university. The situation was markedly different. His body of work is highly reproducible, unlike Obokata’s, and his iPSC technique is used in labs worldwide. But only days before, he was counseling students to stringently avoid careless errors. He appeared shaken as he apologized, according to [Science](#). [3]

On May 2, Riken accepted Ishii’s resignation offer and chose Jun Watanabe, a lawyer and committee member, as his successor. A Riken official told *Bioscience Technology* it was unlikely, given the circumstances, that the committee would make a decision about Obokata’s appeal anytime soon.

On May 4, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported (and Riken confirmed) that Riken President Ryoji Noyori had issued written instructions on April 25 to supervising researchers, including “acid bath” coauthor Yoshiki Sasai, deputy director of Riken’s Center of Developmental Biology. He said he wanted all 3,000 employees to go over their own papers, a total of some 20,000, for irregularities.

Finally, on May 5, the trouble of troubles: Riken confirmed that three more members of the six-member committee investigating Obokata were being investigated due to questionable papers of their own. They were: Riken Group Director Haruhiko Koseki, Riken Chief Scientist Yoichi Shinkai, and Tokyo Medical and Dental University Vice President Tetsuya Taga.

The [investigation](#) [4] is focused on four papers authored by Koseki between 2003 and 2011, and one paper authored by Shinkai in 2005. In both cases, allegations involved images being cut and pasted, and utilized more than once. Tokyo Medical and Dental University received similar accusations with regard to Taga. That university has not yet decided whether to launch a separate investigatory commission.

This leaves only two committee members, not under investigation, investigating Obokata.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has [called for](#) [4] preliminary investigations to be conducted by all involved institutions.

An onlooker scientist notes wryly that said institutions might want to pay the anonymous Japanese scientist/bloggers to do the job.

“It does keep going,” a Riken communications official told *Bioscience Technology*. “Whenever it seems that things are going to start to calm down, something new pops up.”

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Links:

[1] http://www.riken.jp/en/pr/press/2014/20140401_2/

[2] <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v505/n7485/full/nature12968.html>

[3] <http://news.sciencemag.org/asiapacific/2014/04/japans-latest-stem-cell-apology>

[4] <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20140502p2a00m0na012000c.html>