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Plagiarism Didn't Stop New Job, \$1 Million Award for Newly Debarred LSU Researcher

By Theresa Defino

Rakesh Srivastava, a cancer researcher at Louisiana State University (LSU) Health Sciences Center, will be removed as the principal investigator (PI) on a \$1.03 million award from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), now that he has been debarred for two years for submitting a plagiarized grant application in 2012.

The University of Kansas Medical Center (UKMC), Srivastava's employer at the time of the submission, fired him in 2015 for the misconduct, but he later joined LSU as a genetics professor where he continued to research the impact of alcohol on cancer. The plagiarized application, spotted during the peer review process, was never funded and is separate from NIAAA's 2016 award.

The fact that one year after being found guilty of misconduct by his institution Srivastava could not only obtain another high-profile position but also win a large federal grant suggests there was little, if any, communication between Srivastava's former and current employers—not an unusual occurrence. It is not clear whether NIAAA program staff knew Srivastava's history when his award was made. But because a formal federal misconduct finding and sanction didn't come until last month, Srivastava in 2016 was legally eligible to receive the funding that NIH now must take away.

On Nov. 13, the HHS Office of Research Integrity (ORI) announced the sanctions against Srivastava, indicating that his debarment began Oct. 22 (*RRC 11/15/18*). This public acknowledgement of the debarment came six years after the plagiarism was first reported, and three years after an appeal process was begun at HHS involving administrative law judge (ALJ) Keith Sickendick.

Srivastava did not respond to *RRC*'s requests for comment. NIH told *RRC* it would implement the terms of the debarment with LSU's assistance.

LSU would not answer any questions from *RRC* about Srivastava, who has a PhD, including whether it knew of his troubles at UKMC before he was hired and whether he is still employed. The questions *RRC* posed "refer to an internal personnel matter, which the Health Sciences Center will manage in accordance with our policies and procedures," LSU said in a statement.

UKMC did not address whether officials informed LSU or other subsequent employers about Srivastava's misconduct and termination, nor would it answer any other questions.

As far as misconduct cases go, Srivastava's is relatively straightforward, particularly because he admitted to the sole accusation of plagiarism leveled against him, although he denied responsibility. Many cases of misconduct involve scrutiny of years of acts, multiple publications, and forensic analysis of images, none of which were applicable here.

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