

Report on Research Compliance Volume 18, Number 9. August 26, 2021 'Dr. Zheng Did Not Disclose Any of This'

By Theresa Defino

As requested by NIH in April 2020, Ohio State University dug into the affiliations of Song Guo Zheng, MD, PhD, hired barely a year earlier as chair of OSU's Division of Rheumatology and Immunology in the Department of Internal Medicine.

Penn State University, where Zheng had previously worked, notified NIH that it received an anonymous tip he had secret foreign affiliations and support. In November 2020, Zheng pleaded guilty to making false statements, agreed to repay nearly \$4 million, and is now appealing his 37-month prison term—imposed May 14.^[1]

According to most measures, Zheng's case moved fairly quickly through the court system; he was arrested May 22, 2020, less than a month after Michael Lauer, NIH deputy director for extramural research, made NIH's investigative request to OSU.

By that fall, OSU was ready to share the results of its investigation, which Morley Stone, OSU senior vice president for research, did in an Oct. 9, 2020, letter back to Lauer. Although marked confidential, RRC obtained the 47-page document, which includes 20 exhibits, from the publicly available case file. Stone's response provides a rare and revealing look into how an institution could conduct such an investigation, the steps taken along the way and the type of findings that might be expected.

Of note: OSU said in other court documents that responding to government inquiries in this case cost nearly \$500,000, and part of Zheng's plea agreement requires him to pay for it, along with restitution to NIH.

OSU officials were "not aware of how much compensation or remuneration Dr. Zheng has received through the various external academic, grant, Talent Program, and commercial entities" they uncovered, but Stone said in his letter that "we understand that these types of relationships typically include personal financial compensation as well as other kinds of research."

Lauer asked OSU to "review compliance with [NIH] policies on Other Support, Foreign components, Financial Conflicts of Interest, and affiliations on two active NIH awards" for which Zheng was the principal investigator (PI), according to Stone's response. OSU additionally investigated his two subawards, from the Medical College of Wisconsin and from the University of Utah.

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