

Whistleblowers in Science

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Whistleblowers in science have nothing to do with whistles, the term was coined because a whistleblowing would get someone's attention and "whistleblowers" also get someone's attention.

Unfortunately it would seem that science is not above reproach when it comes to cover ups and scandals.

A whistleblower is a person that turns to the appropriate authority to report scientific misconduct.

There are certain laws in place to protect a whistleblower from retaliation. Retaliation can come in several different forms when someone steps up and tries to report misconduct:

- Civil lawsuits
- Being fired
- Being black listed

Often when a person steps forward to report scientific misconduct the tables are turned, and the accused institutes a lawsuit for slander. This is maybe the only defense that the accused has. The accused may try to defend their position by accusing the whistleblower of making up the information and slandering the good name of the accused.

Being fired from a position because the whistleblower uncovers inappropriate action is also a familiar punishment for trying to do what is ethically correct to do.

Finally being black listed is another fate the whistleblower may suffer.

There are protections under the law in place to prevent that whistleblower from being on the receiving end of any punishment for stepping forward. Sometimes these laws work and sometimes they do not.

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A Whistleblower Case

Example from [LA Times](#) (by Marla Cone) ^[1]:

"Deborah Rice, an award-winning toxicologist, was removed from a group of experts researching a widely-used flame retardant after industry lobbyists complained that she was biased. [...]"

Toxicologist Deborah Rice was appointed chair of an EPA scientific panel reviewing the chemical a year ago. Federal records show she was removed from the panel in August after the American Chemistry Council, the lobbying group for chemical manufacturers, complained to a top-ranking EPA official that she was biased.

The chemical, a brominated compound known as deca, is used in high volumes worldwide, largely in the plastic housings of television sets.

Rice, an award-winning former EPA scientist who now works at the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, has studied low doses of deca and reported neurological effects in lab animals. Last February, around the time the EPA panel was convened, Rice testified before the Maine Legislature in support of a state ban on the compound because scientific evidence shows it is toxic and accumulating in the environment and people. [...]"

EPA officials removed Rice because of what they called "the perception of a potential conflict of interest." Under the agency's handbook for advisory committees, scientific peer reviewers should not "have a conflict of interest" or "appear to lack impartiality. [...]"

EPA documents show that Rice's comments while serving on the panel focused on technical, scientific issues. For example, she advised the EPA to consider the cumulative effects of not just deca, but chemicals with similar neurological effects."

Dr. Deborah Rice had studied deca, a chemical compound, from the public health point of

view. Her job as a member of the [EPA panel](#) [2] was to give scientific advice on environmental matters. She gave an educated warning on the dangers of the chemical compound, and got insulted and fired for it.

This demonstrates how cruel the world may be for whistleblowers who do unpleasant discoveries (especially if the consequences of the findings have negative impact on big business).

Some Famous Whistleblowers

- **David Graham:** A medical doctor and employee of the Food and Drug Administration, Graham is Associate Director of the FDA Office of Drug Safety. Following Merck and Co's withdrawal of their pain medication Vioxx in September 2004 for causing an estimated 27,000 strokes, heart attacks and deaths, Graham told a U.S. Senate hearing that FDA conflicts of interest left the nation "virtually defenseless" against similar drug problems.
- **David Lappa:** A nuclear engineer at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory who resigned in 1998 after 20 years of service, Lappa filed a lawsuit saying the lab retaliated against him for reporting plutonium-handling violations. He settled a whistle-blower lawsuit against the lab for \$250,000
- **David Lewis:** Lewis was a microbiologist at the EPA for 31 years. In a peer-reviewed article in Environmental Science and Technology he showed that pathogens could easily remain undetected in untreated sewage sludge. Since the government is pushing the use of this sludge for agricultural fertilizer, Lewis was harassed and finally fired in May of 2003. At a hearing on the role of science in shaping public policy he charged the EPA with "corrupt[ing] the scientific peer review process in order to support certain political agendas and further the agency's self-interest."
- **Bruce Boler:** Boler, an EPA biologist, resigned in 2003 to protest the acceptance by the EPA of a developer-financed study that concluded that wetlands give off more pollutants than they absorb. The study suggested that golf courses and other developments would be better for the environment.

All of the above was taken from sourcewatch.org [3]

In each of these examples the whistleblower was protecting the well being of the public through honest reporting.

Science is built on checks and balances. Why would someone be punished for shedding light on a potential harmful practice, or [misconduct](#) [4]?

Clearly a whistleblower is typically punished because the information can cut into profits, can stall progress and effect public policy and opinion of a project.

Coloring the whistleblower as disgruntled, troublemaking and an out an out liar are tactics used to discredit the whistleblower and to make the opinion of the whistleblower less likely to be believed.

Using punishment tactics can be used to provide a lesson to future whistleblowers, resulting in the likelihood that a scientist will turn the other cheek when scientific misconduct is suspected.

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Links

[1] <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-epa29feb29,0,6191299.story?page=1>

[2] <http://yosemite.epa.gov/sab/sabpeople.nsf/WebCommittees/BOARD>

[3] http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Kill_the_messenger:_whistleblowers_and_cover-ups

[4] <https://www.explorable.com/scientific-misconduct>