

34. Discussing Preliminary Data – Marie Shields Case

While attending a national conference, George O'Hara, a senior scientist, heard a presentation by Marie Shields, a graduate student, on the development of a new device for the high fidelity amplification of sound. This is an area on which Dr. O'Hara has been focusing his recent efforts. Ms. Shields seems to have overcome one of the difficulties he has been struggling with, although she is not yet ready to publish her work. After her presentation, Dr. O'Hara approaches Ms. Shields and invites her to join him for lunch and a discussion "of her outstanding seminar." Ms. Shields is elated by the attention from such a prominent neuroscientist and accepts his invitation with enthusiasm. During their meal together, Dr. O'Hara asks Ms. Shields about various aspects of her project, including the area that has been problematic for him. She answers all of his questions, volunteering a considerable amount of information not contained within her formal presentation. When Ms. Shields asks about his own research, Dr. O'Hara makes only a brief general comment and quickly turns the conversations back to her work.

Discussion Questions

1. Has Dr. O'Hara acted responsibly?
2. Has Ms. Shields acted sensibly?
3. Would it have made any difference if the situation were the same except that: (a) the speaker's work had already been published? (b) Dr. O'Hara was the speaker and Ms. Shields a member of the audience?
4. Is it prudent to orally present work that has not yet been published?
5. What responsibilities, if any, does one have when using ideas presented by someone making an oral presentation? What about ideas obtained in a private conversation?
6. If Dr. O'Hara publishes a paper that contains some ideas that parallel those of Ms. Shields, did he necessarily obtain the ideas from her? Under what circumstances should he cite her?
7. If Dr. O'Hara uses Ms. Shields' ideas in his paper and does not cite her would that constitute plagiarism? If so, would she have any recourse?
8. Could/should Ms. Shields' advisor have better prepared her to deal with a situation like the one that she encountered?