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Title: Blinded by Private Conflict – Choosing Ego Over Professionalism

Research area discussed in the scenario: Mentorship conflict

ECCRI contexts discussed in the scenario: Training, Supervision and Mentoring; Publication and Dissemination

Narrative:

While studying at Corton University School of Medicine, Catherine Davies did her best to manage her spare time the right way. She never wanted to look back at her life, in retrospective, and see missed opportunities, ideas that were never realized and dreams that she never brought to existence. With that in mind, it is understandable why she got involved in numerous extracurricular activities, such as partaking in various student organizations, workshops and courses that were focused on developing practical skills and knowledge. You can only imagine how incredibly lucky she felt when fortune smiled upon her, giving her an opportunity of a lifetime.

While participating in a symposium dedicated to cardiovascular disease prevention that was held by one of the student organizations, her involvement didn't go unnoticed – she got in touch with one of the most acclaimed scientists of the contemporary, Andrew Nichols, head researcher at the Hinton Institute of Biomedical Sciences. Andrew wanted to recruit a student for his new project, not because he wanted someone just to serve him and his renowned colleagues, but because he thought that a younger person, a bright spark, could bring a lot of positive energy and innovative ideas to the work environment. Recognizing Catherine as the perfect candidate, he welcomed her to the place he considered home: his laboratory.

Catherine spent years working relentlessly, every second of her leisure time was spent at the institute. Andrew and his crew were amazed by her work ethic, they praised her for her major contribution to the project and recognized the fact that she is extremely capable of doing anything she sets her mind to. The project itself was a big one, a showstopper, and its findings were to change the views on cellular processes present in ischemic heart disease. While the project was being wrapped up, Andrew found the perfect journal for the paper to be published in. Catherine, on the other hand, couldn't share his enthusiasm as much as she should have. After passing all her exams with flying colours, there was only one thing that was standing in her path towards receiving her medical degree – writing her graduate thesis.

Throughout the years of studying the medical field, Catherine realized that she wanted to put her knowledge and hard work into becoming a neonatologist. She loved scientific research and she treasured the time she had spent at the laboratory; she was grateful for all the skills she had acquired while working with Andrew and his team, but she was certain that, in the future, she wants to be a clinician. Graham Schulz was the mentor of her dreams, a successful neonatologist whose contribution to the NICU at University Hospital was celebrated by

everyone. Catherine was a prime example of an outstanding student, it came as no surprise when Graham agreed to mentor her. As much as she was ecstatic to finally do some work in her field of interest, she fell under a lot of pressure because she felt like she needed to impress her mentor.

Once, during their discussion of her thesis, she mentioned the project that she worked on with Andrew Nichols and his team. What she didn't expect by any means was the anger that flashed across Graham's face. He scolded her and told her that if she wants to have him as a mentor on her graduate thesis, she mustn't be published as one of the authors on Andrew's research paper. After Graham infuriatingly left the room, Catherine felt like her whole world has shattered. She called Andrew immediately and told him what had happened. His response was very calm and collected as he told her to stop by his office next morning.

She walked into his office hesitantly, she couldn't sleep all night. She kept thinking about how even though her well-deserved opportunity with Andrew's project had felt like a blessing, like she had found her four leaf clover, at that very moment, it began feeling like a curse. Andrew told her to sit down, and he began telling her a story about two young, enthusiastic medical students, full of life, ready to take over the world. A story about best friends turned rivals. It was about Graham and himself, they had a tight-knit friendship that turned sour once jealousy got the best of them. After they finished medical school, Andrew's scientific work became well known in the world and Graham couldn't stand the fact that his friend was deemed more successful by the rest of their colleagues. That's when he stopped speaking to Andrew. Andrew was amused by the fact that Graham, even thirty years later, couldn't get over it, but he felt sorry for Catherine, a stellar student who didn't deserve, by no means, to feel the consequences of one's bruised ego and personal conflict.

Question for researchers:

1. If there was no possible way for Catherine to do both, be published as a co-author on Andrew's research paper and have Graham as her mentor, what would be a better option for her? Should she choose something that she worked hard for, or should she leave those years of hard work behind just to start something in which she's unexperienced, but is dreaming of?

Question for research administrators/integrity offices:

1. Graham's behaviour is driven by his personal frustrations and is blinding him from making rational decisions which leads to him being unprofessional towards a person who has nothing to do with it. Is it allowed for a professional to decline mentorship to someone out of a personal conflict that has no real connection to the protégé? If so, should such thing be banned?
2. Even though Catherine's problem began because of one's personal life intertwining with the professional one, should she be allowed to try and make amends between the two of her mentors, even though that would include mixing private matter into business once again?

Keywords: mentorship; publication; personal conflict; non-professionalism; graduate thesis

References:

ALLEA European Code of Conduct

Suggestions for further reading:

Straus SE, Johnson MO, Marquez C, Feldman MD. Characteristics of successful and failed mentoring relationships: a qualitative study across two academic health centers. *Acad Med.* 2013 Jan;88(1):82-9. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0b013e31827647a0. PMID: 23165266; PMCID: PMC3665769.