

Bioethics Book Club



Intuition A Novel by Allegra Goodman
The Dial Press, 2006

Summary¹

Young Postdoc Cliff Bannaker works in a cancer research lab at the Philpott Institute. The lab is co-directed by the publicity seeking oncologist Sandy Glass, and the exacting senior scientist Marion Mendelsohn. The lab has not seen any promising results for a long time and is in desperate need of a grant, so when Cliff's experiments start to show promising results, everyone gets very excited. The expectations for Cliff's experiments are high, but soon his girlfriend, Robin Decker, who also works in the lab, suspects that Cliff's findings are fraudulent. As Robin makes her doubts public, Cliff maintains his innocence and a controversy unfolds in the lab that has life-changing impact on everyone in it.

Ethical Issues

Scientific integrity

Data manipulation

Scientific misconduct

Public trust in science

Whistleblowing

Record keeping

Discussion questions:

- Discuss the role that 'intuition' plays in the novel and how it is displayed by the different characters in the controversy.
- What is the relationship between ethics and intuition or "gut feels"? Is it similar to the sort of intuition that this story focuses on?
- Do you think Robin should have rested her case after the private seminar where Cliff admitted to his poor record keeping?
- The US Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Research Integrity (ORI) defines scientific fraud as "fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results." Do you think Cliff's handling of his research data amounts to falsification?
- Discuss the role/function of whistleblowing for protecting scientific integrity.
- Do you think a whistleblower should be required to provide proof?
- Do you think Robin had sufficient evidence to raise allegations against Cliff?

¹ Adapted from publisher's summary.

- Discuss how Sandy's and Marion's personal interests and values influences the way they handle the controversy.
- Why is scientific fraud a concern for ethicists as well as scientists?
- Cliff, and everyone else in the lab, was under pressure to achieve results. Discuss some of the external mechanisms that may drive some researchers to 'cut corners' or compromise principles for good conduct of research. What does this imply for research ethics?
- "“Poor record keeping does not necessarily indicate a desire to mislead,” Cliff reads as he sat with Tim Borland at their celebratory lunch in Romagnoli's. ‘Inconsistent scientific results are not necessarily commensurate with data manipulation. Faulty or even false conclusions do not necessarily connote fraudulent claims.’” Do you agree with this assessment of Cliff's case?
- In 2005, the Norwegian oncologist, Jon Sudbø, published an article in *The Lancet* suggesting that non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen could diminish the risk of cancer in smokers. The results were based on a study of 900 patients. In early 2006 it was revealed that the data were fabricated. Discuss the effect of scientific fraud on patients and on health care organizations involved in medical research.
- What measures can health care organizations take to promote a culture of integrity in the conduct of medical research and to prevent cases of scientific misconduct?
- The Singapore Statement on Research Integrity, which was developed by participants at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity, outlines four principles for responsible conduct of research: honesty, accountability, professional courtesy and fairness, and good stewardship of research on behalf of others. Do you think professional courtesy and fairness were exhibited by Robin and the other parties involved in the controversy?

Discuss the following passages from the book:

- “But why shouldn't I get started with them [Office of Research Integrity in Science]?” Robin blurted out. [...] ‘They look at you,’ said Larry, ‘and they smell blood.’ ‘Mendelsohn and Glass?’ ‘No *you*. See, you don't get the politics of the situation here. You would be the sacrificial lamb.” (p. 219)
- “There was the book way of working, and then there was the reality. There was the presumption that everything that touched nudes was sterile, and the reality that equipment was often only fairly clean. There were rules and regulations posted in the lab and animal facility, and then the general standards of the community. Robin's case against Cliff might as well have been a case against the status quo, and argument against the natural bumps and jolts of the creative process.” (p.203)
- “Oh come on, no lab is going to have totally transparent records,’ Sandy said. ‘No one is going to be coherent in the middle of making groundbreaking discoveries. These are private notes here!’ He picked up a sheaf of papers in Cliff's handwriting. ‘They weren't written for submission of some kind of trumped-up interrogation.’” (p. 232.)
- “It was Louisa, the older sister, who shook with disbelief. To see her father humiliated this way! To see him presented by ORIS as the willing dupe of an ambitious postdoc. She understood that there would be no quick comeback from this, no easy recovery. This was such an assault on her father's reputation that she suffered the blow herself; she trembled for him.” (p. 288)