



Institute for Stem Cell Science & Regenerative Medicine (DBT-inStem)

## Research Integrity and Research Ethics Policy

Responsibility, accountability and good practice form the core of our research endeavours and are crucial to building trust in science. Members of our community will uphold the highest standards of research integrity and responsible conduct in research at all times.

### **Misconduct in Research**

Research misconduct refers to the fabrication (reportage of experiments never performed), falsification (misreporting, modification or suppression of data to project a desired result), and Plagiarism (reporting another's data as your own) of material by any member of the community at inStem in any aspect related to the conduct of research. Breach of confidentiality i.e. presenting as one's own, ideas or data obtained from privileged access to original grants, manuscripts etc., is also considered research misconduct.

### **Aims & Scope of the policy**

The policy outlines institutional processes to promote good research practice and investigate and respond to reported incidents of research misconduct. Institutions will ensure a fair and thorough investigation with confidentiality maintained throughout the process.

### **Raising Awareness**

An orientation module will be mandatory for all new appointments. The office of Research Integrity and Documentation, inStem, will implement these modules. Refresher modules that provide guidance on research practice and responsible conduct in research, will be conducted at regular intervals and attendance is mandatory (once every 12–18 months) for all researchers, including investigators. Discussion groups and Workshops will be conducted to facilitate discussion and generate awareness about issues related to integrity in the conduct of research. These will be coordinated by an institutional committee.

### **Investigation into Alleged Misconduct**

The charge of research misconduct has serious implications for all concerned. Therefore an investigation related to the review of the alleged misconduct will be kept confidential to the maximum extent possible. Caution will have to be exercised to distinguish between differences in interpretation or unintended errors from the *wilful misrepresentation* of information. Thus, the procedures adopted to address the issue of misconduct will perforce have to be flexible and determined on a case-by case basis.

### **Reporting and evaluation of the complaint**

Reports of alleged misconduct in work generated in the institution's laboratories, can be made directly to the office of the Heads/Dean of Research or Research Infrastructure, or Director, inStem or a committee with broad representation of the academic community (student, postdoc, scientists), whose membership will not exceed two years. The misconduct may be reported through different channels/committees, but must finally be reported to the Director/Head of the Institute. If there is a conflict of interest (e.g. the complaint is against the Director/Head of the Institute), the misconduct may be reported to the Head Research or Head Research Infrastructure. Misconduct may be reported by a member(s) of the community of inStem or elsewhere. The identity of the individual making the complaint (complainant) will not be revealed at this time. To warrant investigation, anonymised reports/complaints must necessarily be supported by credible substantial data indicating misconduct. The processing and resolution of complaints will be coordinated with the office of Research Integrity, Ethics and Documentation.

A first evaluation of the complaint will be made by a Preliminary Investigation Committee (may include an external member), which will investigate if there are reasonable grounds for the allegation. If not, the complaint will be dismissed. A written report stating the reasons for the dismissal shall be maintained but will not enter the subject's confidential record. The complainant

will also be notified of the basis of the dismissal. The Preliminary Investigation Committee's proceedings are confidential.

### **Investigating a credible complaint**

If the preliminary evaluation indicates that the allegation of misconduct warrants a full investigation, the following processes will be initiated with appropriate documentation of procedures:

- All data, past academic records, lab [e]notebooks, emails on the matter under investigation will be sequestered by the institution
- The person against whom the complaint is being made (subject), will be informed of the allegations.
- Head Research in consultation with the Director will appoint a committee to conduct a full investigation into the allegation of misconduct.
- Committee composition
  - I. The chairperson will be an external member (who is not affiliated with the institution/campus) but, may be a member of the Scientific Advisory Board.
  - II. Two domain experts appointed in consultation with the Chair,
  - III. One member of the institution faculty
  - IV. One Peer Representative each of the subject and complainant who will serve as observers and will be considered invitees.

The committee will be invested with complete confidentiality and will not be permitted to interact with the press. The committee is expected to function with full cognizance of the rights of the subject and the complainant.

The investigation will assess:

- the accuracy of the charge of misconduct
- the extent and nature of the alleged misconduct,
- the relevance of any other material or information revealed in the course of the investigation into the alleged instance of misconduct.
- The role of the laboratory head and work environment in contributing to the misconduct.

In the course of the investigation the committee will be given access to grants, reports, primary data, electronic records, manuscripts and any other material requested and that may be considered relevant to the inquiry. The committee will have access to laboratory premises and permitted interviews with laboratory personnel, the complainant and the subject. The committee may meet with other colleagues of the subject and complainant, with prior consultation with the Heads of Research and the Director. The committee is expected to complete its investigation at the earliest, and not exceeding a period of sixty (60) days.

### **Outcome of the Investigation**

A 2/3rds majority decision is required to establish misconduct. The decision will be communicated in a signed report to Head of Research and Director, for further action. The time frame may change during the course of the investigation but may not exceed a period of 60 days. The committee may also recommend that the scope of the investigation needs to be expanded beyond the original allegation. This will be examined by the Head Research and Director.

The Director and Head Research will discuss the report with the subject and the laboratory head. If research misconduct is established, appropriate action – decided by Institute leadership or the Governing Body, should the Director be the subject of the complaint– will follow and be reported to the investigation committee. The subject of the complaint will be notified in writing of the decision, which will enter the subject's confidential record. The outcome of the committee's investigation will remain confidential.

### **Safeguard against malafide intention**

Every effort will be made to safeguard the interests of the complainant. However, if it is established that the charges were motivated by malice, the institute will formulate an appropriate course of action against the individual(s) concerned.

### **Reporting responsibilities**

- I. If, following the aforementioned process, a credible case of research misconduct is established, the confidential investigation report and outcomes will be communicated to the Secretary DBT by the Director.
- II. If research misconduct is established in a project funded by extramural grants and/ or concerns work *in communication*, or published, the following will result:
  - The Director would report back to the Investigation Committee on the action taken
  - The funding agencies will be notified by the Director.
  - The concerned journals must be notified by the laboratory head in consultation with the Head of Research and Director. In the unfortunate case of a retraction or any other penalty, institutional comment will be limited to an expression of regret in the public sphere.

### **Quantum of punishment**

Options may include: barring an investigator from applying for funding for a certain period, disallowed PhD student for a certain period of time, holding up annual increment, demotion, and even suspension in extreme cases. These may be decided at the institutional level with the concurrence of the governing body.

Whistle-blower protection policy: whistle blowers providing credible information of misconduct are guaranteed anonymity

### **Recommended readings:**

- On Being a Scientist: Responsible Conduct in Research, National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine, Rossner and Yamada 2004,
- What's in a picture? The temptation of image manipulation *J. Cell Biology* 166, 11–15; Editorial, 2006 Beautification and Fraud, *Nature Cell Biology* 8, 101–102;

*Note: This document is developed with inputs from several institutions in India and was presented to the Governing Body in 2021.*