

Friday 9th October, 2020**To:****Human Resources****Chief**, Ms. Esther Quek**Divisional Head**, Ms. Eileen Chua**Senior Executive**, Ms. Hayley Ng**Legal and Secretarial Office****General Counsel and Chief Legal Officer**, Mr. Gregory Chew Hew Teck**Director, Office of Ethics and Compliance**, Ms. Joanna Foong Chi Yuen**Deputy Director, Legal**, Mr. Adrian Chiew Choong Yee**Cc:****Research Integrity and Ethics Office****Research Integrity Officer**, Associate Professor Roderick Bates**From:** Mohamed Mustafa Mahmoud Helmy**Re:** Rupshi Mitra (henceforth RM) violating NTU Research Integrity Policy, Harassment Policy, and The University Code of Conduct.

This letter is submitted on the request of Chong, Shin Kay (Ms.) with whom I had a meeting with Oh, Seok Fen (Ms.) and an intern whose name I cannot spell attending on Tuesday 6th October. The meeting concerned the ongoing inquiry into allegations of research misconduct and harassment by RM. References in this letter are to my submission *Main.pdf* and *Appendix.pdf*, and subsequently on the request of the inquiry *Main2.pdf*, *Appendix2.pdf*, *Main3.pdf*, and *Appendix3.pdf*.

In the meeting with Ms. Chong and others representing HR, I was reassured that a holistic and serious approach is taken. At the same time, my impression was that my submission was not addressed holistically and seriously. Ms. Chong claimed that my being bullied into research misconduct is new information or a new allegation to her even though the first sentence of my first submission states “...*I am being bullied into compromising research integrity...*” (emphasis in the original). Also at the same time, Ms. Chong said she had not considered Appendix 2 as it is difficult to read. In the following I address the points Ms. Chong explained to me were not clear to her and asked me to send in writing.

1. Illegal animal experiments

- a. The most urgent concern is that RM tasked me with killing animals without informing me of research question, objective, outcome, and protocol. There are several additional concerns related to this task which violate NACLAR Guidelines and are evident of research misconduct. For example these are transgenic animals but this is not in RM’s AUP: A19027, the sample collected, and other deviations. However, this task alone is illegal for me to do. As far as I understand, legislation and responsibility goes something like this: the Animals and Birds Act → AVA → NTU CEO → NTU IACUC → RM → me. Until I am informed otherwise, doing research with RM makes me liable to pay a fine not exceeding \$10,000, go to prison for a year, or both. RM is bullying me to do things that are against what I understand is the law of Singapore and I will not be held responsible.
- b. NACLAR Guidelines are very strict regarding euthanasia and terminal sample collection for reasons involving the animal, the researcher, and the research. The Guidelines describe procedures at several levels to safeguard the well-being of the animals and researcher, and to ensure success of the

research. In RM's task, the well-being of the animals and researcher is not considered. I was informed nothing about the research, but from the method and sample to be collected I can say the outcome is meagre and of bad quality. I request the reader to please consider what it means to kill several dozens of animals for no reason if the reader had to do it herself or himself.

- c. I think there are at least two important facts here, not allegations. They are not allegations because it is not necessary to accuse RM of wrong-doing while stating these documented facts. I have no authority to interpret these facts, but as it concerns me, I do not understand why these facts are ignored in favour of selected points raised during the meeting and mentioned below. If there is a dispute about the fact that it is against NACLAR Guidelines to task a researcher in animal research without informing him of the research, please speak with Professor Bates. If the fact that RM gave me this task is disputed, please see the emails I sent and received from and to her, found in abundance in the first Appendix and Appendix 2.

2. Research-related communication

- a. Ms. Chong explained to me that text in the first Appendix with scientific terminology, for example in my correspondence with RM, is not accessible to her. As I am being bullied into research misconduct, the documentation cannot be completely free from jargon. I will illustrate with an example from my interactions with RM without scientific terminology:
- I am told to train under the Research Assistant how to 'manually' analyse videos of behavioural tests, basically a mouse running around some kind of box or platform. By manual analysis we mean using a stopwatch, paper, and pencil. One of these tests is called Test A and it is done using RM's Method B.
 - RM tells me that *all* of the following are none of my concern: Test A, Method B, any other test and method, any research question, objective, protocol, plan, and outcome, the grant I am working under, plans for co-authorship, and a review article I wrote for publication. All this information would remain none of my concern until after I finish my training as a post-doctoral researcher under a research assistant, in the area of the post-doctoral researcher's expertise, and complete the experiments as instructed. These instructions include RM prohibiting use of software (freely available at NTU) for automatic analysis of Test A and other tests. RM gives the reason that since I have no published data on Test A, therefore I need training, and RM also has no published data on Test A.
 - RM issues orders to me directly by email and indirectly through the Research Assistant to extract Outcome C from Test A using the stopwatch. She gives instructions for the Research Assistant to perform random checks on my manual analysis of Test A with no instructions on how and why these random checks are to be performed.
 - RM presses for Outcome C of Test A in a period of time that is incompatible (physically impossible) with the number of animals used in Test A. In addition, I am required to manually re-analyse the same videos of Test A *again* to extract Outcomes D1 and D2, but without training and random checks by the Research Assistant. RM also demands statistical analyses of Outcomes C, D1, and D2.
- b. I think there are some questions raised by the content and form of this communication with no jargon, personal perspective, nor allegation, such as:
- Why is the Research Fellow, who is paid this much, being indefinitely trained under the Research Assistant? Why was he employed as Research Fellow if NTU will be paying the Research Assistant to train, supervise, and instruct him for the foreseeable future? To use a stopwatch?

- Can any researcher get on with their work without knowing *something* about the research question and objective, and without knowing *anything* about the research protocol, plan and outcome? Is that even legal when animals are involved?
 - Why is RM prohibiting the use of software freely available at NTU, indeed in the same room the experiments are done? Assuming the benefits of applying digital technology to modern research, why is RM pushing for Outcomes C, D1, and D2, using unreliable and manual methods requiring days, when Outcomes C, D1, D2, and a lot more can be obtained accurately and automatically in an instant?
 - What was the purpose of the random checks and why were Outcomes D1 and D2 not included in the training and only later added?
 - Why is RM not communicating directly with her Research Fellow?
 - Does this not look like bullying?
- c. In the example above, communication between a PI and a research fellow is described and not placed into context and is without background. For this example, some background includes:
- RM knows my expertise in tests more complicated than Test A.
 - RM has no published data on Test A neither. In this case it is the light-dark box. In RM's protocol Method B the light-dark box is all dark. So Test A is without meaning.
 - Statistical analyses of an ongoing experiment is always unethical, regardless of statistical method. In particular, RM uses a statistical method in her publications produced at NTU where it is strictly not allowed to analyse the same data twice with that same statistical method.
 - Outcomes D1 and D2 are equal, $D1 = D2$. In other words, RM is either unaware that she is demanding a meaningless task requiring a *second* and unplanned manual analysis, or she is deliberately humiliating me by demanding a meaningless task.
- d. This example is not an allegation, these are a series of facts, documented in correspondence received from RM, her words not mine, in the first Appendix. It is not necessary to make allegations for this example.
- e. I may describe more examples backed up by documented evidence upon request.

3. Evidence from publications

- a. On the request of the inquiry, I have to look closely at publications by RM and AV. Some of the results of these analyses are in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3. I quote facts and figures in RM's publications about experiments, funding, peer review, co-authorship, and in relation to other publications by RM and AV. I put in the references, equipment brochures, specifications, and so on. Appendix 3 is data copied from RM's publications, text copied from RM's AUP: A19027, and a table of RM's publications and some of AV's. There is nothing subjective. My perspective is absent. I believe there is sufficient evidence in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 to suspect systematic research misconduct, and perhaps misconduct in financial, academic, and conflict of interest terms.
- b. I understand Ms. Chong's statement that this evidence presented is from her perspective allegation. However, it is believed the scientific method and language work towards eliminating personal perspectives from the production of knowledge. Appendix 2 is based on objective evidence, and Appendix 3 is only objective evidence. Thus far, I have not objectively discussed these data with a representative of the inquiry. Based on what were Ms. Chong's statements?

4. Accuracy of my submission and. Ms. Chong's statements

- a. Ms. Chong claimed that my allegations of harassment were 'general' and 'not specific'. She repeated that a 'third party' sees matters very differently from how they are seen from my perspective. She

selected certain issues such as shouting and vulgarity (discussed below) as evidence of harassment, while ignoring evidence of harassment related to my case and described here and in my previous submissions.

- b. In addition to overlooking the first and central complaint, that I am being bullied into research misconduct, Ms. Chong also misrepresented or misunderstood about whom the complaint is. Curiously, her opening statement was something along the lines of this is about my 'allegations of harassment by RM against [myself] *and* the Research Assistant'. Given her claim about the seriousness with which the matter is viewed, I thought there would be no place for such an inaccurate statement, and which needed her to make an 'edit' in her notes when I pointed out that no such allegation was made. Are allegations of harassment taken so generally to casually include others?
- c. Why is, for example, RM's threat to terminate my contract, sent to SBS HR, not specifically intimidating? Does it show integrity, ethical use of power, and responsibility to cancel a research project under a fictitious pretext? How is excluding me from anything to do with the science of research, merely issuing meaningless and occasionally illegal orders through the Research Assistant not demeaning? What is not humiliating about manually performing a job for days and weeks when the job can be done so much better and instantly in the same room as the experiments and for free?

5. Preferred evidence

- a. I found it strange, among other things, that Ms. Chong chose to ignore the majority of in her own words '67 pages' of documented evidence, and instead for example, suggested that to substantiate my allegations of harassment I must produce witnesses for being shouted at during a meeting with others. Why was this point selected in preference to, for example that in precisely the same context and pages, RM:
 - Tells me off for something she told me to do.
 - Tells me off to say I'm an incompetent and negligent worker.
 - Sends an article and a link that have nothing to do with what she's talking about.
 - Gives bizarre instructions such as to act immediately and simultaneously check and clarify several times.
 - Writes that she will not meet with me to discuss plans until I've sent a review on a drug when she already had the review in the email she had clicked reply to.
 - Orders me to summarize the review when it was already summarized in a table.
 - Asks for information on the drug that was already in the review.
 - Orders me to *immediately* order the drug whereas just a short period of time earlier she was postponing the meeting I had requested to plan on what to actually do with the drug.
 - Orders me to *immediately* order something to dissolve the drug in, not the ethanol she was insisting upon earlier, something else, but she does not say which one, and she suggests salty water which is strange because we already have gone into lots of back and forth, including with a world-leading authority in the Netherlands on how to dissolve this drug, so it should be fairly obvious that it is one hard drug to dissolve.
 - Insists again that I should *immediately* order this unknown thing to dissolve the drug after I had politely pointed out that there are several options and that the price is very variable and can be thousands of dollars.
 - Insists yet again that I order this drug when I do not have the information I need to place an order in Ariba.
 - Finally demands that the Research Assistant order the drug after I send the information to her (incidentally, the Research Assistant did not at that time. I did. I *immediately* sent a PO to Merck/SigmaAldrich when I knew full well that Merck/SigmaAldrich would tell me to use Ariba, which the Research Assistant did some time later).

- b. Ms. Chong also ignored the facts that the drug is for a research project RM cancelled in an email to SBS HR while threatening to terminate my contract, falsely claiming that my salary is running out; a research project which is also another research project under 2 different funding schemes including a T3 grant and all in the same AUP.
- c. In any case, the persons present at the meeting Ms. Chong was interested in because I was shouted at were AV, Wen Han Tong, and Shruti Suresh.
- d. The first time RM shouted at me was because I had asked AV, calmly and politely, what he thought about using ethanol to dissolve a drug when we are going to inject that drug into brain. I did *not* know at that time that AV had used ethanol to dissolve testosterone for injecting into brain.¹ I did not understand what she said. The second time was because I was sharing my query on how the supplier of a product AV was planning to use and whose representative I spoke with suggests methods which start experiments on the same day you do brain surgery on an animal (that's a bad idea because wounds take time to heal; it is a technical limitation which can be overcome with not much effort and some patience). She shouted at me louder, her first words were "...But you should also know that..." and I did not understand the remainder. Ironically, though the article she sent me and told me to "...do homework first...read actual papers..." contained nothing about putting ethanol into brain, it *did* have, as required by international standards of animal ethics and basic rules of physiology, one week of rest for the animals between surgery and experiment.

6. Harassment reduced to vulgarity

- a. Ms. Chong, as a 'third party', could see no evidence of harassment as there was 'no vulgarity' in the communication I received from RM. I checked the NTU Anti-Harassment Policy (approved 26 Dec 2018), Harassment Policy (approved 24 Dec 2018) and all my submissions. I also checked The University Code of Conduct again. To the best of my knowledge, the word 'vulgarity' is not mentioned once in any of these documents.
- b. The University Code of Conduct places a very high emphasis on honesty, respect, integrity, and excellence. The University Code of Conduct demands much higher qualities than absence of vulgarity. RM's actions and communication are intimidating, humiliating, and demeaning. Perhaps vulgarity is placing green tape on a table so the interviewee is sitting on a low and uncomfortable chair while all the other chairs around the table are new and good. In future, I humbly request I am treated with no more and no less respect than any other student or member of staff at NTU.
- c. I am not making allegations of vulgarity. I do not want to be bullied into a systematic research misconduct and am asking for protection.

7. Retaliation

The meeting ended with an unambiguous threat of retaliation, which made me wonder about Ms. Chong's initial reassurance of a holistic and serious approach.

Kind regards,



Mohamed Helmy
Friday 9th October, Singapore

¹ Since the request of the inquiry to submit further evidence of RM's research misconduct and in publications, I now know that AV reports dissolving testosterone to 25 mM in 3% ethanol which is impossible; I will submit analyses of AV's publications as soon as possible.