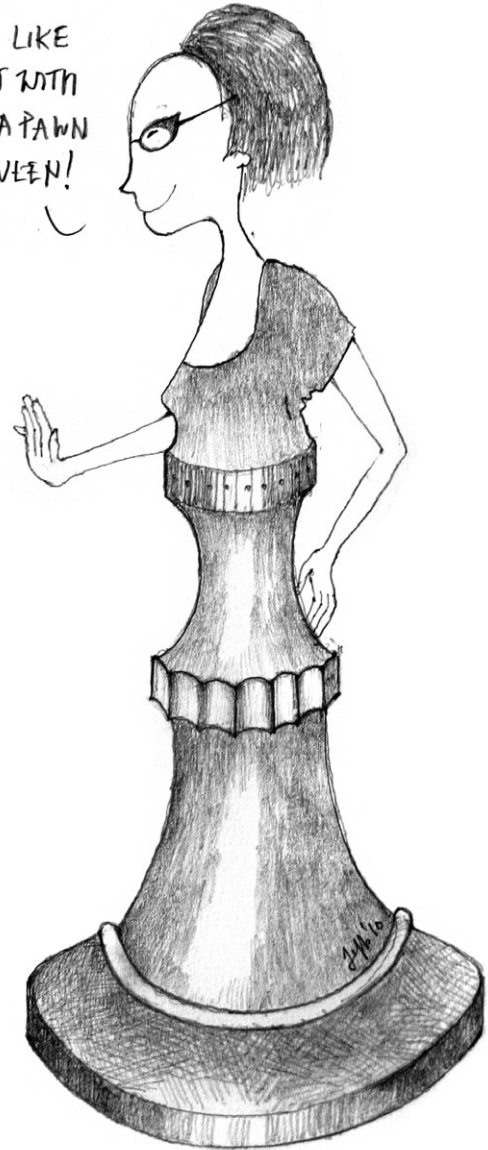


An occasional column, in which Mole and other characters share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Correspondence for Mole and his friends can be sent to mole@biologists.com, and may be published in forthcoming issues.

YOU MIGHT FEEL LIKE
A PAWN, BABY, BUT WITH
STRATEGY, EVEN A PAWN
CAN BECOME A QUEEN!



Loose lips sink (fellow)ships?

The cursing was so loud that I could hear it inside the tissue-culture room, cutting through the roar of the fans like a fresh batch of restriction enzyme. Thinking that one of my colleagues had been injured, I abandoned my cell cultures and dashed into the main lab.

The space was empty; reorienting myself, I realised that the continuing stream of urgent profanity was coming from the next lab down the corridor. As I hastened to the scene, I mentally prepared myself for the sight of blood, acid burns, disfigurement – or maybe even a p1000 Gilson Pipettman impaled into someone's chest. Instead I found Golgi Gal, slumped against the bench glaring at her iPhone.

"Who died?" I gasped, trying to catch my breath.

"My boss," she replied. "Or she *will* be dead, the next time I catch up with her."

In a few minutes I'd managed to talk her down and had her parked in the coffee room, fuming in silence over her double espresso.

"Out with it," I demanded.

Wordlessly, she dug her phone out of her pocket and called up an email. Taking a look, I saw that the note was from Golgi Gal's boss Dr Derivative. But it wasn't addressed to Golgi herself – she'd only been cc'd. Instead, the recipient was someone called "Bob".

"Who's Bob?" I asked.

"Our biggest competitor," she said, still simmering. "Read on."

The note was breezy and familiar, saying how much Dr Derivative had enjoyed chatting to Bob during the drinks session the previous evening. Derivative was, I interpreted from various clues, writing from an international conference, which

was clearly still ongoing. After these preliminaries, Derivative cut to the chase: “I’m pleased to hear that you think our latest finding is intriguing, and that you’d be interested in collaborating on it. I’m copying in the post-doc who’s working on this – I’m sure she’d be delighted to fill you in on all the details and email you the key data for your inspection.”

Suddenly all the profanity made perfect sense.

“You’re not delighted, are you?” I said, putting the phone down.

“We discussed all this before she left,” Golgi Gal said tightly. “We agreed that my big finding was too preliminary to discuss in public.”

She went on to explain that her boss had sworn not to mention the work in her talk or even during informal chats. She also explained how Bob’s post-doc had scooped her last year, and that if it happened again, Golgi Gal would once more be derailed from a top-tier paper. And without that paper, she reminded me, it might be quite difficult to compete with all the other contenders when starting to hunt around for a permanent position next year.

“Why would your boss endanger your position like that?” I wondered, half to myself. “And of all the people to be indiscreet to! But the email says ‘collaborate’. Couldn’t this help you?”

She shrugged. “Maybe we’d get the answer faster with his lab’s help. But I reckon Bob will try to get his post-doc as co-first author, which will dilute my contribution.” After a moment of silence, she went on. “But that’s not even what makes me so angry. What makes me angry is that I feel like a pawn.”

Golgi Gal explained that she felt as if she didn’t have any ownership over her own research. If Derivative had come to her first and asked whether she’d like to collaborate with Bob’s lab, it would have been a different story. But now that the email had been sent, it would be very difficult to retract the offer of collaboration.

I really felt her pain. But although my friend was in no condition to take a dose of perspective right there and then, in some ways I could

sympathize with Derivative as well. Of course if her boss had been sworn to secrecy, she should never have mentioned the result – and she certainly should not have initiated a collaboration without consulting Golgi Gal first. However, there is an infectious momentum about the drinks session at a conference. When you’re having a spirited chat with a like-minded individual about research, it feels very artificial to rein yourself in. Swapping preliminary data, comparing and contrasting related work from two labs, mixing in a bit of speculation and wishful thinking – all of this is a heady mix even before you throw in the beer factor. (And believe me, I have first-hand experience with the latter: after a few pints, I’ll even find myself bragging about my latest western blot to the barman.)

And it’s not just the joys of scientific discussion. Derivative is well respected, but she’s also relatively young. It probably put her in a good light to swap gossip with a big shot like Bob – and if they do collaborate successfully, it will certainly give her a boost. Golgi Gal has only herself and her own interests to look after, but a lab head like Derivative has to consider other factors – in particular the prestige and future funding of the entire lab, and how its reputation is maintained amongst other labs in the field.

Still, I think it’s sometimes difficult for lab heads to remember their own pasts: what it feels like to be mired in that long, uncertain landscape before you’ve achieved some semblance of stability as an academic. In this scary place, words can kill: one thoughtless tip-off about a piece of data really can result in a scoop catastrophic enough to end a promising career. Lab heads like to make light of post-doctoral paranoia, but that’s probably because they’ve repressed their own youthful fears – and of course, because they’ve made it, and now no longer have so much to lose. One scoop can be weathered if you have six other papers in press.

In the past few years, I’ve got the sense that the closed-rank nature of science is slowly opening up: there is a lot of talk about the need to

be more unrestricted with unpublished data. But again, this sort of vibe is coming largely from tenured faculty, not the first authors who might suffer as a result of all this free exchange of information. Sharing knowledge may get us to the answer more quickly, but as long as our job prospects and funding are tied up with how well and often we publish, it’s going to be a contentious balance between advertising your preliminary findings from the rooftops and keeping stum.

Fortunately this particular story had a happy ending. Golgi Gal did *not* murder Dr Derivative on her return. Instead, on my advice, she took her aside and told her frankly that being copied into a ‘let’s collaborate’ email had not been a very pleasant experience. Derivative was immediately chastised and apologised for all her indiscretions which had, after all, only stemmed from good intentions – and that second extra-large vodka tonic. Meanwhile, it turned out that Bob’s post-doc had bigger fish to fry, so Golgi Gal got a great deal out of collaborating with one of Bob’s PhD students instead, a lovely woman with complementary skills who was perfectly happy to take a second authorship in exchange for Golgi’s leadership and experience. The end result has just been accepted in a top-tier journal, and Golgi’s – and Derivative’s – futures just got a little bit brighter.

After my chat with Golgi Gal that afternoon, I went back to my abandoned tissue-culture experiment, looked down the microscope at it and saw something truly amazing. For a few weeks I’d been thinking that my latest little theory was looking good, but this was the first inkling I’d had that it might be truly solid – and exciting.

Just as I was putting my dishes back in the incubator, Dr Keen stuck his head around the corner.

“Got anything yet?” he asked.

“Nope,” I said. “I’ll let you know the minute I do.”

X-Gal

Journal of Cell Science 123, 3829-3830

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doi:10.1242/jcs.081414