Professor Sues University Over Building He Is Funding

A cancer drug that chemist Robert Holton invented has reaped more than $350 million in royalties. But his efforts to transform part of that windfall into an expanded chemistry program and new building for his school, Florida State University (FSU) in Tallahassee, has led to a lawsuit and a pitched battle between the school’s chemistry department and its administration.

The suit, Holton says, was a last resort after the university backed out of a 2002 agreement to construct a five-story building to study his kind of chemistry—molecular interactions and the synthesis of new molecules—as well as to double the size of the synthetic chemistry faculty. Instead, the university plans to use the money to construct and equip a general chemistry building different from Holton’s vision. “Onerous” demands by Holton forced the administration to “adopt a new direction,” wrote FSU President T.K. Wetherell in a July letter to trustees. Wetherell took the helm after planning for the building was already well under way.

“I am disappointed and embarrassed,” says Holton, who offered $18.5 million from his lab account, which the university says it won’t return, for the $67 million facility. “We thought we had it worked out.” About Wetherell, a former politician and lobbyist with whom Holton has clashed, “I’m better off saying nothing.”

In the early 1990s, Holton invented the cancer therapy Taxol, which had peak sales of $1.6 billion in 2000 and last year totaled $256 million. Under agreements with Bristol-Myers Squibb, Holton receives a 40% share of the royalties and the FSU chemistry and biochemistry department a 30% share, of which half flows to Holton’s lab account. The university gets 30%.

In the late 1990s, the chemistry department’s account swelling, unanimously agreed to a dramatic expansion in synthetic chemistry. A 1999 agreement among Holton, his MDS Research Foundation, the department, and the university spells out how the money would be spent. Modified in 2002, the pact included 165 fume hoods for toxic chemicals, at a cost of up to $50,000 apiece. The state has chipped in $11 million but is not a party to the suit.

University administrators say Holton has micromanaged the plans, including making “parking demands.” Holton denies that he’s made further requests and says, “we have not added a single thing” to the 2002 agreement.

Regardless, says FSU general counsel Betty Steffins, “there is nothing to return” when it comes to Holton’s lab account funds because that money belongs to the university. FSU has agreed to return $5 million of the $11 million donated by the foundation in 2002.

POLITICS

Antiterror Law Intrusive, U.K. Academic Groups Warn

CAMBRIDGE, U.K.—Several scientific and academic groups objected last week to a tough antiterrorism law making its way through the U.K. Parliament. The critics argue that academic freedom could be endangered by language stating that if lecturers and lab chief “know or suspect” that their students are terrorists, they must withhold from them knowledge of “noxious substances.”

In a statement on 12 November, the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) warned that, “as drafted, the bill could make it illegal to teach about the safe use and handling of chemicals with explosive properties.” The RSC wants to see some sections “redrafted.” Neville Reed, director of RSC community and members’ services, says, “We understand the reasoning behind the bill, … but because it is written so broadly, there’s a danger of encompassing things that are part of normal teaching.”

A lecturer might be in the position of having to demand why a question is being asked, rather than saying, “That’s an interesting question.”

The Association of University Teachers (AUT) also lobbied for changes in the bill’s language, arguing that there is a “huge risk that entirely legitimate forms of academic enquiry will be criminalized.” AUT head of parliamentary affairs John Whitehead cited three clauses that aroused concern, one of which has now been rewritten to narrow a prohibition against the “glorification” of terrorism so that it applies only to people who clearly intend to engage in terrorism. But he says the clause that refers to people whom an instructor “knows or suspects” of having bad intentions needs to be changed simply to “knows.”

The bill, introduced last month by the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair, was passed by the House of Commons last week, but only after critics forced through an amendment cutting back the amount of time a terrorism suspect may be held without charge from 90 to 28 days. Now it goes to the House of Lords, where observers say further revisions are likely.

—ELIOT MARSHALL