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News

Nobelists defend actions of sacked dean

Grant committee deny dean had any influence on grant decisions.

Linda Nordling



Members of an independent grant committee have written to the Karolinska Institute to defend the former dean, who was fired for trying to influence them. Camilla Svensk/ Karolinska Institutet

In a letter obtained by Nature, prominent scientists serving on a grant evaluation committee for Sweden's prestigious Karolinska Institute write that they "sincerely regret" the dismissal of research dean Karl Tryggvason earlier this month.

Tryggvason, a clinical pathologist, was removed as dean on 2 March and Martin Ingvar, a professor in neurophysiology, was named as his replacement on 22 March.

An internal investigation found that Tryggvason had tried to exert "undue influence" over the committee that was overseeing the university's prominent professors grant programme. The independent committee of top researchers he appointed to distribute the programme's funding includes three Nobel laureates: Joseph Goldstein, Paul Nurse and Bengt Samuelsson.

The programme, worth 157 million Swedish kronor (US\$22 million), aims to boost research quality at the university by rewarding its best scientists. But when the winners — 35 of 149 applicants — were announced on 4 December last year, the Karolinska Institute received a letter from some of its professors questioning the selection process.

The internal investigation revealed that Tryggvason had sent an e-mail in November last year from his personal address to Goldstein, the chairman of the committee, after receiving the committee's final shortlist. In his email, Tryggvason informed Goldstein that two of the professors the committee had chosen to receive awards were no longer eligible, and suggested two alternative names — potentially compromising the committee's independence.

The former dean is also accused of failing to ensure that the grant committee complied with the university's rules for how to handle conflicts of interest. According to Harriet Wallberg-Henriksson, president of the university, one of the committee members was part of a European Union-funded research project with three of the applicants, but went on to judge their applications nevertheless.



Karl Tryggvason admits he broke the university's conflict of interest rules. Camilla Svensk/ Karolinska Institutet

"This breach of the rules was communicated to the dean of research, who did not act on it," says Wallberg-Henriksson. She says that "trust in the Karolinska Institute, both internally and externally, has been damaged by the way our former dean handled and led the selection process for the prominent professors programme".

In a statement to Nature, Tryggvason, who retains his professorship at KI, admitted that sending the committee his suggestions on who should replace the two ineligible professors was "not correct". But, he added, "I had no personal interests and have never worked or published with those two outstanding scientists." Deans giving such advice is "common practice" in other universities, he said. "But this was not correct according to Karolinska's rules, and I admitted that."

He also said that he was confident the committee were aware of KI's conflicts of interest rules before making any funding decisions but, nonetheless, it appeared that "one of the seven committee members had expressed opinions about some scientists he had declared conflict with". "I did not personally

participate in the committee meetings so I do not know the details of the discussions," he added.

Conflicting stories

The university is investigating whether the committee's decisions can legally be overturned, and the grants redistributed. An answer is expected within a month.

But in their [letter](#), dated 6 March, the committee's members deny that Tryggvason acted unethically.

"The input that we received from Professor Tryggvason provided essential general information about the Karolinska Institute and in no way influenced the Committee's judgment in reaching a final decision," they write.

The conflicts of interest were disclosed to the committee and taken into account in the deliberations, they add. "Throughout the process we remain convinced that [Tryggvason] behaved in a transparent and entirely ethical manner."

Tryggvason's dismissal is a loss for the university, they add. "We applaud Professor Tryggvason's actions to enhance biomedical science at the Karolinska Institute and sincerely regret that his efforts have led to his dismissal as Dean of Research."

Meanwhile, Wallberg-Henriksson denies rumours on internet discussion boards that a "personality clash" between her and the former dean played a part in his dismissal. "On the contrary, I have been very enthusiastic and supportive of the roadmap for research produced under Tryggvason's leadership," she says.

She also says that Tryggvason's potential influencing of the committee is not the point. "Our former dean sent e-mails via his private e-mail address where he expressed his personal views about how the university's grants should be distributed. It does not matter whether he was able to influence the committee or not," she told Nature.

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- [#9926](#)

Influencing scientific projects & budget distribution has become a

common practise worldover. Indian science has been affected very badely by such practise. I thank Karolinska's rules & wish it should be followed worldover in all scientific institutions. Anurag chaurasia, ICAR, INDIA, anurag@nbaim.org, anurag_vns1@yahoo.co.in, +919452196686(M)

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Prof Tryggvason's action should not be criticized as he was transparent on his action. A suggestion to the committee members of high repute can not be a pressure on the selection. As a part and parcel of the institute Prof Tryggvason has every right to suggest for the betterment of the Institute. If he has contributed significantly to the Institute, it should be also considered for his undignified removal from the Deanship. However, outside the Dean-arean, Prof Tryggvason can also contribute to the Institute in a better way, getting more time from the routine official work.

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