

Dear scientist colleagues at ETH Zürich and CNRS:

I am Vicki Vance, a plant scientist and Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of South Carolina, USA. I am writing this open letter to inform you of my experiences with regard to the current investigations of Professor Olivier Voinnet at your respective institutions.

I am making two documents available to you for your information in regard to the investigations. The first is a post that I made on April 1, 2015 at a website called "*PubPeer*". I made this post after learning that many of Prof. Voinnet's articles had come under suspicion of scientific misconduct using software that can detect such improper manipulations of data. At that time, I felt that it would have been both dishonest and a disservice to science if I did not reveal my experience from nearly twelve years prior with regard to the review of an article entitled "Probing the microRNA and small interfering RNA pathways with virus-encoded suppressors of RNA silencing" by Patrice Dunoyer, Charles-Henri Lecellier, Eneida Abreu Parizotto, Christophe Himber, and Olivier Voinnet, which was eventually published in *Plant Cell*, 16(5):1235-50 (2004). I should note that, although most posts on that site are anonymous, I preferred to take full responsibility for my statements and so I signed my name and gave contact information. The *PubPeer* post can be viewed here:

<https://pubpeer.com/publications/F5BA8FE3EF8860205332839D02BBDD#fb27806>

The second document I want to bring to your attention follows from the *PubPeer* post. I was under pressure to prove that my comments at that site were true. However, the events happened so long ago that I no longer had the relevant reviews. But one of the journals, *The Plant Cell*, keeps an online archive of each person's reviews so I was able to access that review. I tried to convince the *The Plant Cell* editors to post the review, but they were reluctant to do so. In the end, I posted it myself on my ResearchGate account. It can be viewed here:

<http://tinyurl.com/qebftrk>

The review has been viewed 4000 times at this writing and downloaded about half that many times. Many of my colleagues have expressed shock at the reported behavior of Prof. Voinnet and disbelief that the article could actually have been published. Together, with the many *PubPeer* posts identifying fabrication of data presented in the figures of many of Prof. Voinnet's articles, I think this information points to a pattern of violation of ethical scientific standards by Prof. Voinnet.

A final point is that I have read that the posts showing fabrication of data in the figures of many of Prof. Voinnet's articles were viewed by some people as having little importance. The rationale being provided is that the results are still valid because other labs have been able to show the same results. That is NOT completely true. The practice of fabrication of data by the Voinnet lab has had serious negative impact on the field of RNA silencing. Many investigators are, in fact, not able to repeat some aspects of his reported results or have conflicting data. However, once results are published in high impact journals by a powerful and important senior investigator such as Prof. Voinnet, there is little chance to get funding to pursue conflicting data and further experimental approaches are stalled. I am a tenured

scientist, approaching academic retirement and can therefore afford to bring these items to light. However, because the consequences of Prof. Voinnet's unethical behavior are not yet clear, many scientists more junior than I am are afraid to speak up and risk the wrath of Prof. Voinnet, should he remain the powerful force he has been in the past.

In summary, I think that Prof. Voinnet's unethical behavior has damaged the field immensely because it is no longer clear what is true in his work and what is fabricated. In my opinion, these are serious incidences of scientific misconduct and I hope that your investigations will consider them as such.

Sincerely,

Vicki Vance, PhD

*Department of Biological Sciences
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina 29205
USA
vance@biol.sc.edu*