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June 4, 1991, Tuesday, Late Edition - Final

NAME: Thereza Imanishi-Kari

SECTION: Section C; Page 1; Column 1; Science Desk

LENGTH: 1788 words

HEADLINE: 'I Am Innocent,' Embattled Biologist Says

BYLINE: By PHILIP J. HILTS, Special to The New York Times

DATELINE: BOSTON, May 30

BODY:

Ranged against Dr. Thereza Imanishi-Kari's view of events are the Secret Service, a Congressional committee, a panel of five prestigious scientists, and, lately, the Nobel laureate David Baltimore as well.

This short, gray-haired woman of 48 years remains unmoved. She is the focus of one of the most bitterly disputed cases involving allegations of misconduct in the history of American science. But in her laboratory at the center of the storm, there is an unreal calm.

"I know it sounds tacky," she said, "but I am innocent. I really refute all of this stuff."

Until this week, on the advice of her lawyer, she has avoided interviews. Her lawyer's comments were also limited to one or two lines declaring that she was innocent and that she had been treated unfairly by the National Institutes of Health.

But on Wednesday and Thursday, as she sat in her tiny cubicle at Tufts University Medical School in Boston, she spoke to a reporter calmly and without apparent defensiveness or anger. Rather, she seemed just weary. "It is a terrible stress," she said. "It takes a lot of the energy I have just to answer these allegations. Before, the only worry I had in life was to do my science, to concentrate and take care of the lab. And of course to be a mother as well."

Her therapy has been working in her garden at her Somerville home, where she reads

mysteries for escape as well. "I tried to read Franz Kafka's 'The Trial,' but I couldn't do it because I always felt myself in the place of Joseph K. I felt the helplessness of someone who doesn't know why he is in such a situation. And I feel I am being watched all the time."

At work, students surround her as work goes on in the laboratory. But when the telephone rings, the fax machine whines, and the mail arrives, it often brings more dark news of the celebrated case that is now called alternatively, "The Imanishi-Kari Affair" or "The Baltimore Case".

After years of suspicion, this March investigators at the National Institutes of Health finally accused her plainly in a draft report: they said she had faked the data to support a 1986 scientific paper on immunology. Their conclusions were based on the forensic work of the Secret Service, a scientific review by five prominent scientists, and the dogged investigation of Congressional staff members over several years.

The matter began with a paper published in 1986 in the scientific journal *Cell*, signed both by Dr. Imanishi-Kari, who was then a laboratory chief at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and by Dr. David Baltimore, who was then at the Whitehead Institute, a molecular biology lab affiliated with M.I.T.

The 1986 paper announced a remarkable finding that could have made Dr. Imanishi-Kari famous had it proved true. The article suggested that the natural defenses of the body might ultimately be coaxed into producing a desired variety of antibodies by inserting the gene for a foreign protein. Such a technique would have marked a major advance in stimulating the body's defenses to resist infection.

But just after the article's publication in 1986, serious trouble began. Dr. Margot O'Toole, then a post-doctoral researcher in Dr. Imanishi-Kari's laboratory, charged that the data in Dr. Imanishi-Kari's laboratory notebooks did not support the claims made in the paper.

Five years and four investigations later, N.I.H. investigators concluded that Dr. Imanishi-Kari had faked data over a period of several years, both before the paper was published and later to cover up the false data it contained. The report from the N.I.H. Office of Scientific Integrity concluded that "Dr. Imanishi-Kari repeatedly represented false and misleading information to the N.I.H." and complained of her "reckless disregard for the truth."

She speaks quietly about the matter: "I might be indicted, so you don't mind if I tape this interview, do you?"

In the beginning of the case, and continuing up to the time the N.I.H. draft report became public in March, it was Dr. O'Toole who had reason to believe the whole world of science was against her. The tables have turned.

Dr. Imanishi-Kari's isolation in the scientific community is increasing day by day. She

has always been something of a loner, someone who spent by far the greatest part of her life at work. She was born to Japanese parents, sharecroppers in a small Brazilian town near Sao Paulo. At age 18, she left home to study biology at the University of Sao Paulo, and since that time she has kept on moving: a master's degree in Japan; a Ph.D. from the University of Helsinki; postdoctoral years in Cologne, Germany; and then to M.I.T. in 1981.

She is now separated from her Finnish husband, and her chief emotional support comes from her 15-year-old daughter and her 24-year-old niece, both of whom live with her in Somerville.

Yes, she said, there were false statements in the 1986 paper, but they were inadvertent. Yes, she now believes they should have been corrected in 1986. But as for faking data, no. "I never made anything up," she said. "These were real experiments." Looking a reporter in the eye, she pleaded directly, "Why do you believe these things?"

She said she had the most powerful reason not to cheat. As she told Representative John Dingell, the chairman of the Congressional committee that investigated the case: "I would like to ask you to think about what possible motive I might have to cheat. For very personal reasons, it was important -- actually it was vital -- that the data for these experiments were exactly correct. These experiments are the ones that hopefully will guide scientists in trying to cure diseases of the immune system. One these diseases is lupus, an autoimmune disease."

A Compelling Reason

"Mr. Chairman, I have lupus. My sister died from lupus. That was in my mind all the time I was doing my research. If I had fabricated data, it would have misled scientists, wasted their precious resources and retarded their efforts to cure the disease that killed my sister and threatens me."

Dr. Imanishi-Kari dismisses as unconvincing the Secret Service evidence against her. "You believe everything they say," she said, adding that she was in deep trouble "because everybody is believing what is concluded from the skimpy Secret Service report."

The Secret Service evidence has become the heart of the matter, because it was that which convinced the panel of five prominent scientists to turn against Dr. Imanishi-Kari's version of events.

One panel member who was among the most sympathetic to Dr. Imanishi-Kari, Dr. Hugh McDevitt of Stanford University, said throughout the years he looked into the matter that he assumed that Dr. Imanishi-Kari was telling the truth unless very strong proof to the contrary was presented.

He was not completely convinced when he found out that at least two important statements in the paper were completely false and Dr. Imanishi-Kari admitted these were mistakes.

But later the weight of the evidence from the Secret Service finally convinced him.

"I believe there was fraud," he says now. "Sometimes I wake up at night and fear that we are concluding fraud unfairly. But I cannot get around that Secret Service evidence," he said.

In one part of the paper, it was said that a normal mouse reacted differently to tests than the experimental animals in which they were trying to create the new antibody property.

But in fact, the data showed that normal mouse had reacted in just the opposite way. Worse, Dr. Imanishi-Kari later admitted that the mouse was the wrong one, but then offered other data which she said were for the "real" normal mouse on which the claim in the paper was based. But this second offering of data, according to Secret Service evidence, was also faked.

The Secret Service found many other suspicious features in the lab notebooks: numerous dates were altered; some comments and data were overwritten in different inks; facts were changed and old ones covered over meticulously in some places, even to the point that correction fluid was used to white out both the front and the back of the page where the information was changed.

Most damaging of all were the data tapes, which are printouts from the laboratory machines on which the experiments are conducted. They automatically record data from an experiment, and also print on the sheets sequential numbers every few minutes so that the order of data can be determined.

The Secret Service found that other researchers in the lab had in their notebooks data sheets whose paper, ink, and counter numbers matched with the dates on which the work was said to be done. But Dr. Imanishi-Kari's notebooks had abrupt changes in ink as if rollers had been changed, counter numbers that were far out of sequence, and paper that apparently was no longer in use in the laboratory.

The central claim of the paper depends on how many mice showed the unexpected antibody properties. But the statement in the paper that said this work was done, she has admitted, was false.

"We did not do it," she said. But in explanation, she said a similar characterization was done on other mouse samples. But these, too, have now been questioned by investigators.

The reconstruction of events indicated by the Secret Service evidence is one in which someone had taken old tapes from several years previously, and inserted them in the notebooks with new dates and other alterations so as to make them appear as part of experiments carried out in 1985. In fact, the Secret Service said, the evidence suggests that this faking was done after the paper was called into question in May of 1986.

Dr. Imanishi-Kari's retort is simply that the Secret Service evidence is unreliable. She

asks: Are they certain that the data tapes could not have been made when she said? What is their evidence that the inks are different? Isn't it possible that the counter numbers were different because a different machine was used? Shouldn't they check more researchers beyond the ones already checked to see if they might have tapes out of time sequence?

A hard moment came recently when Dr. Baltimore, after five years of fiercely defending Dr. Imanishi-Kari and the 1986 paper, reversed his position. He retracted the paper, conceded there was a possibility of fraud, and said Dr. Imanishi-Kari must defend against the charges herself.

Asked about this blow, she took another drag on one of the many cigarettes she had consumed during the interview, "I don't have anything to say about what Baltimore says. He says what he wants to say. I respect his decision. It does not affect what I think of myself. At all."

She added, "I hope when this is over I can become happy again."

GRAPHIC: Photo: Dr. Thereza Imanishi-Kari at work in her lab at Tufts Medical School in Boston. (Rick Friedman for The New York Times) (pg. C10)

LOAD-DATE: June 4, 1991