

October 8, 2019

This narrative summarizes an incident that occurred at a poster session at the 2019 JMIH meeting in Snowbird, Utah. This statement serves as the final public communication about the event.

There are two core issues/charges that are central to this complaint. First, that there was bullying involved. As has been reported, it has been determined definitively that there was no bullying. Rather the crux of the problem stems from a naive poster presenter and a preexisting taxonomic disagreement. With that stated, we are grateful to the poster presenter for his honesty and complete cooperation as we reconstructed the events of that day.

A previous public statement, intended to absolve Dr. David Hillis of any wrongdoing, was posted on the web page as a testimonial that he could point to should any additional rumors or comments come to light. We underscore that sentiment here, Dr. Hillis did nothing wrong at the 2019 JMIH poster session, his behavior in this incident was appropriate and benign. We regret he was subjected to false rumors and accusations.

Second - that there was ill intent or malfeasance by either Dr. David Hillis or Dr. Brian Crother. After reading through all of the accounts of this incident and subsequent phone calls and email communications, it seems that the following outline describes the incident.

As the poster session began Hillis had a discussion with the poster presenter about the chosen taxonomic name (genus) used on his poster - the exchange was friendly and encouraging of using whatever name the poster presenter preferred. He (the poster presenter) decided to change the name on his poster and did so with a marker. This name change was not caused by any goading or bullying by Hillis, as confirmed by the poster presenter. In fact, the presenter has stated to us in writing "that no one ever defaced or vandalized my poster. I made the vast majority of the changes, and gave full permission to anyone else who wanted to add their two cents."

As the poster session wore on, the poster presenter was questioned by others about the generic name change made on the poster with a marker. It was during these interactions with others that the story regarding the changed taxonomy took on a new life. The presenter began to insinuate to those around him that Hillis encouraged him to make the change. These insinuations, heard and overhead by numerous individuals, including Crother, eventually served as the basis for the Safety Officer contacting Hillis about bullying.

After an hour or so into the session, Crother had a discussion with the poster presenter at which time the presenter stated to Crother "that if he disagreed with Hillis he was more than welcome to add his two cents." Crother then scribbled out the changed name, added some negative color commentary, and included his initials. This response by Crother was inappropriate, writing a derogatory comment aimed at Hillis on the poster was not professional. Later, after further discussion with others about the back and forth concerning the name, additional text was added to the poster by unidentified individuals. It seems that the interactions at this poster were intended to be lively and carefree if not ill conceived. Nevertheless, writing anything on the poster of another scientist has no place at a scientific meeting. There can be no justification for such behavior.

In sum, the poster presenter told a story that was intended to be a hoax, but as the rumor mill churned, the story became contorted into something else; that Hillis had bullied or forced the presenter to change his poster and that Crother had taken offense and had forced his comments on the poster. As established above, the contorted story was not accurate. Hillis did not bully the presenter and Crother did not force his comments on the poster. In all fairness to the presenter, he was unaware of the existing controversy underpinning the scientific argument about the generic name applied to the species in question. Clearly, Crother and Hillis disagree on the genus.

Rumors, once begun, went viral at the meeting and resulted in a report to the Safety Officer of bullying (without specifics) on the day following the poster session. Once the report had been forwarded to Hillis, Hillis reached out to the poster presenter, who was still in the dark about how far this incident had gone. The poster presenter apologized to Hillis about the incident. The Safety Officer failed to contact the poster presenter to verify that no bullying had occurred. While the intent of the email to Hillis was to solicit information and to learn more about the incident, the email did not clearly convey that intention. We have modified the initial contact with anyone accused of wrong doing to be sure that our message is neutral and expresses clearly that we are essentially fact finding and seeking clarification about the reported incident. While this entire incident is regrettable, and some actions were, we believe, unintentionally harmful; we have no evidence to suggest any malicious intent by any of the involved individuals.

We regret that not every incident reported can have an outcome that is satisfactory to everyone involved. But, the reality in this case is that events, much of which should not have occurred, spun out of control. It is our hope that the previous web posting along with this statement will clarify how things came to the current situation and will end any rumors of bullying by Hillis. Hopefully, we can all transition back to the scientific discussions which are the core reason for the JMIH meetings.

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Henry Mushinsky, Chair, JMIH Meeting Planning and Management Committee