

# Arpad Pusztai – Scientist Whistleblower



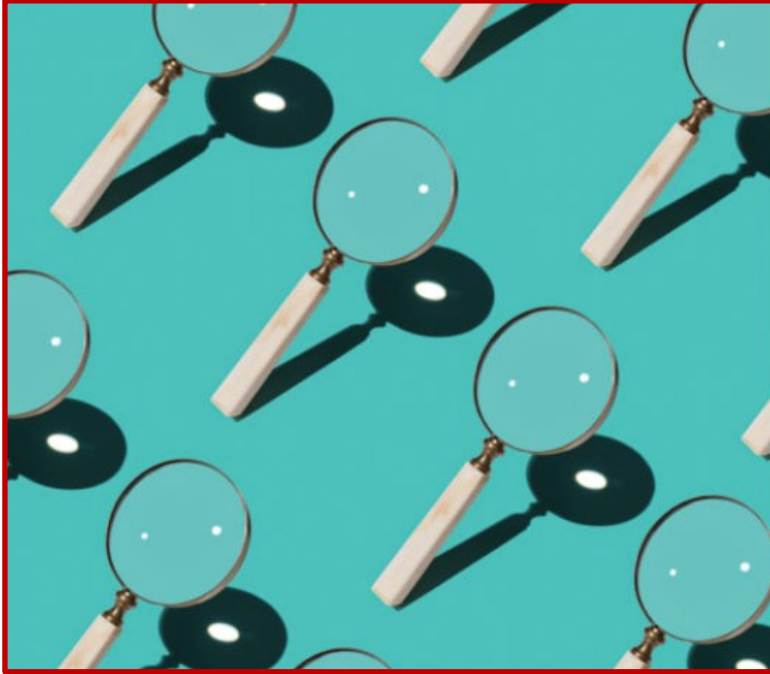
by Angelika Hilbeck - A Colleague & Friend

# **Whistleblowing in Science**

Typically about revealing **misconduct in scientific practice.**

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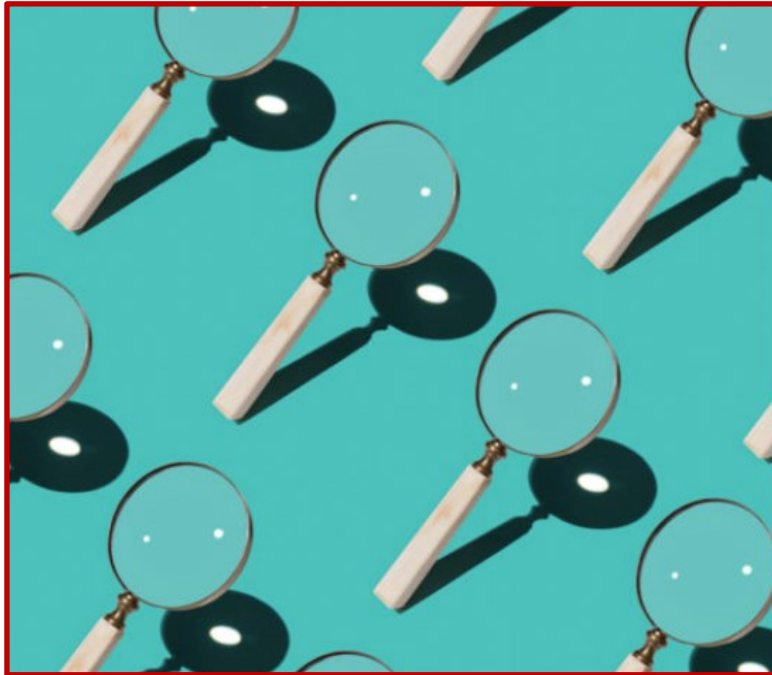
## *Opinion:* Science Needs Better Fraud Detection – And More Whistleblowers

*An influential paper on amyloid protein and Alzheimer's potentially fabricated data. Why did it take 16 years to flag?*

*Visual: Moment via Getty Images*

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***“Whistleblowing should not need courage because it should be the norm: The very job of scientists is to advance their fields by questioning their knowledge.***

Yet we should seek not to undermine science, but to demand more of what science demands of itself: consistent and comprehensive improvement.”

<https://undark.org/2022/10/26/science-needs-better-fraud-detection-and-more-whistleblowers/>

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According to this US publication - targeting the *'ideologically based, anti-science culture of the Trump administration'* – Whistleblowers in science reveal evidence for:

*“... a violation of law, rule or regulation; gross mismanagement; a gross waste of funds; abuse of authority; or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety.”*

## Speaking Up for Science

A Guide to Whistleblowing  
for Federal Employees



2018



Government Accountability Project  
1612 K Street NW, Suite 1100  
Washington, DC 20006  
202.457.0034

[www.whistleblower.org](http://www.whistleblower.org)

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# Whistleblowing in Science

Rarely about fraudulent or suppressed because inconvenient scientific content resulting in false or misleading conclusions for the policy making process

*“If .... disagreement with a policy decision is rooted in a difference of opinion, rather than about the specific consequences of the policy decision that ...would result in legal violations, gross mismanagement, gross waste of funds, abuse of authority or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety, that policy disagreement would not constitute protected whistleblowing.”*

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It is this undefined space of what constitutes a '*policy disagreement ... with specific danger to public health and safety*' where scientists with a conscience become victim of & target without protection to vicious, targeted, organized campaigns of career assassinations and orchestrated professional reputation defamation.

The Jury of the German Whistleblower Prize hoped to offer some recognition and – ideally – protection in this space of imperfect science



In 2005, Dr. Árpád Pusztai was awarded the German Whistleblower Prize from the Federation of German Scientists (VDW) and the International Association of Lawyers against Nuclear Arms (IALANA) honouring his blowing-the-whistle regarding **the safety of genetically modified (GM) organisms.**

Dieter Deiseroth, Annegret Falter (Hrsg.)

## Whistleblower in Gentechnik und Rüstungsforschung Preisverleihung 2005



Theodore A. Postol Arpad Pusztai



BWV • BERLINER WISSENSCHAFTS-VERLAG

Four criteria have to be met for this prize:

- 1) Revealing serious wrongdoing.** This is understood as disclosing serious misconduct, grave grievances or developments in his/her working environment or sphere of activity, which are or may be associated with considerable dangers or risks to human life, health, the sustainable protection and development of ecosystems, the basic democratic order or the peaceful coexistence of people.
- 2) Sounding the alarm by “going outside”.** If the whistleblower’s internal raising alarm is suppressed and/or ineffective, he or she will turn to outsiders or to the public, namely to supervisory authorities, ombudsmen, members of parliament, professional associations or trade unions, journalists or the public at large via mass media.
- 3) Primarily disinterested motives – serving the public interest.** Raising the alarm is not done out of self-interest, but primarily for motives oriented towards the protection of important legal interests. Such legal interests are human life, health, peaceful coexistence, democracy, sustainable protection and development of ecosystems. The person concerned does not seek or achieve any economic advantages for him/herself or those close to him/her by whistleblowing.
- 4) Acceptance of serious disadvantages – risking retaliation.** The whistleblower accepts that his/her whistleblowing is associated with considerable risks and/or disadvantages for his/her own professional career or personal existence or that of relatives.

## 1 Revealing serious wrongdoing.

*...grave grievances or developments in his... sphere of activity, which are or may be associated with considerable dangers or risks to human life, health, ....*

The Pusztai Team's feeding experiments raised serious questions not only about the specific lectins engineered into potatoes but also about the general safety of the genetic engineering process for the first time. It turned out that not only the introduced lectins, but also the inserted transgene, i.e. **the genetic engineering technique itself, caused the damage in an unknown way.**

This was a key finding since the GM lobby's main argument for deregulation or at best soft touch regulation was: focus on the product only, **the process is per se safe.**

Ewen SW, Pusztai A (October 1999). "Effect of diets containing genetically modified potatoes expressing Galanthus nivalis lectin on rat small intestine". Lancet **354** (9187): 1353–4

## 2 Sounding the alarm by “going outside”

*.... he ... will turn to outsiders ... or to the public... at large via mass media*

Arpad Pusztai reported on his findings in a June 1998 TV interview, with the approval of the then-director of the Rowett Institute Philip James and in the presence of the institute's press officer, and broadcast on 10 August 1998 in the television program "World in Action" (Granada TV). In it, Arpad Pusztai used the following formulations to outline his research results which turned his life upside down and cost him his job:

*“,... the effect was slight growth retardation and an effect on the immune system. One of the genetically modified potatoes, after 110 days, made the rats less responsive to immune effects. [...]*

*If I had the choice, **I would certainly not eat it** till I see at least comparable experimental evidence which we are producing for our genetically modified potatoes. I actually believe that this technology can be made to work for us. And if the genetically modified foods will be shown to be safe, then we have really done a great service to all our citizens. And I very strongly believe in this, and that's one of the main reasons why **I demand to tighten up the rules, tighten up the standards.**“*

cited after A Rowell 2003

### **3 Primarily disinterested motives – serving the public interest.**

*Raising the alarm is not done out of self-interest, but primarily for motives oriented towards the protection of important legal interests. Such legal interests are human life, health, ...*

Arpad Pusztai's action were without any self interest and oriented exclusively towards the protection of human life and the environment. His ethics and public service attitude were beyond doubt, to which also this event with the distinguished guest speakers are testimony.

In his acceptance remarks for the Whistleblower Award, Arpad Pusztai reminded the audience that in a world where large corporations pursue their financial and political goals with little regard for the people they are supposed to benefit, and are given few limits or even support by political institutions, it is the special duty of scientists to serve the public interest without fear of consequences to themselves.

#### **4 Acceptance of serious disadvantages – risking retaliation.**

*The whistleblower accepts that his whistleblowing is associated with considerable risks and/or disadvantages for his own professional career or personal existence or that of relatives.*

Arpad Pusztai was subject to the worst kind of treatment of a scientist whose 'crime' was to simply tell his findings truthfully to the public and offer his take on a technology he was undoubtedly, indisputably qualified and obliged to make:

- lost his life-long career position
- threat of losing his pension
- Being gagged to disenable him from the fundamental right of self-defense – a gross violation of personal rights
- orchestrated smear campaigns and personal vicious attacks and vitriol
- expulsion from his usual scientific community

# Consequences

The science establishment of those days has done itself a disservice, their acts were wrong and anti-science. Public trust in the technology could not be gained.

Today, 25 years later:

- Except for 2 countries, no GM crops are cultivated in Europe. In those 2 countries, only 1 GM maize was approved for cultivation and used for local feed only, the cultivation area is on a decline
- GM foods can hardly be found and marketed in Europe
- Lectin GM crops never left the laboratory



## **Dieter Deiseroth (1950 – 2019)**

Former Judge at the German Federal Administrative Court

A committed initiator and driver of the Whistleblower Award as well as the Whistleblower Award book publications, his expertise, the uncompromising precision of his judgments and sincerity gave the Whistleblower Award the format of an ‘unimpeachably valid decision’.

**He called for measures to ensure that dissent in science does not become a personal existential risk for scientists who hold dissenting opinions out of professional ethical responsibility.**

Dieter Deiseroth 2011. Kontroversen um die „Gen-Kartoffel“ – der Fall Arpad Pusztai. In: Matthias Maring (Hrsg.): [\*Fallstudien zur Ethik in Wissenschaft, Wirtschaft, Technik und Gesellschaft\*](#) Scientific Publishing



**Thank you for listening!**