

CASE 7: A sudden discovery of potential misuse (discussion stimulus)

At the end of the first year of their three-year PhD program supported by a governmental funding institution, a group of PhD students in physics discover that their collaborating group abroad is financed by a foreign military institution. It is only now that they realize that their basic research aim – to reduce the size of an electromagnetic laser, currently at 30 meters to 3 meters – could contribute to the development of future weapons. However, making this research aim applicable to weapons might take up to 20 years.

When the PhD students submitted their PhD applications, they asked questions about the ultimate aim of the research, but no potential military applications were mentioned. In light of the new findings, a few of the PhD students are considering leaving the current research group and look for another one.

What would you do if you were one of these PhD Students? What support should the university give to the PhD. students if you are supervisor or head of department?

1. I would continue with my work. I am responsible for good scientific practice and open collaboration, but not for the potential application of research results.
2. I would continue with the work. Some research is more expensive than others and without 3rd party funding there would not be any innovation in the natural sciences.
3. I would continue my work because I want to finish my Ph.D. My resignation would not change anything: the research would still go on.
4. I would resign from the research group since I am concerned about the possible military use of our results.
5. I would resign from the research group since I do not approve of collaborating with foreign military institutions, and could not accept being associated with them.
6. I would resign from the research group since I do not feel taken seriously as a young researcher. I will look for a research group where important information about who is collaborating with whom and who funds the research is distributed in a nonhierarchical manner.

[If you make use of this for training purposes please acknowledge source as: EC-funded PRO-RES Project <http://prores-project.eu/>

Similarly if you wish to suggest a case to be deposited on the website contact us with your suggestion.]