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# Revisiting a 1930s Scandal, AACR to Rename a Prize [1]

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From Science Magazine [2] The Cornelius P. Rhoads Memorial Award has long been a coveted prize in cancer research. Named for one of the most prominent American medical researchers of the mid-20th century and a director of the Sloan-Kettering Institute, the prize is awarded each year to a promising researcher under the age of 40; it has gone to eminent scientists such as Eric Lander of the Whitehead Institute and Scott Lowe of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. But Rhoads's name was removed from the prize this week following an investigation of Rhoads's conduct as a medical researcher in Puerto Rico in 1931. The controversy arises from a notorious letter Rhoads wrote but never mailed during his stint at the Presbyterian Hospital in San Juan. The text was publicized anew last fall by biology professor Edwin Vázquez, who stumbled on it while preparing a lecture for his students at the University of Puerto Rico. In the letter, Rhoads denigrated Puerto Ricans as "the dirtiest, laziest, most degenerate and thievish race of men ever to inhabit this sphere. ... What the island needs is not public health work but a tidal wave or something to totally exterminate the population." Rhoads followed with a shocking assertion: "I have done my best to further the process of extermination by killing off eight and transplanting cancer into several more." Outraged by the letter, Vázquez wrote to the group that administers the

award, the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR), and demanded that it remove Rhoads's name. Word spread via e-mail, triggering others to write, including Ferdinand Mercado, Puerto Rico's secretary of state. In December the association suspended the prize and commissioned an independent investigation by Jay Katz, emeritus professor of law, medicine, and psychiatry at Yale Law School, and a specialist in medical ethics and human experimentation. Katz concluded that although there was no evidence that Rhoads killed patients or transplanted cancer cells, the letter itself was sufficiently reprehensible to warrant removing his name from the prize. AACR concurred and announced its decision Monday. "We were very troubled and shocked" to learn of the letter, said Margaret Foti, CEO of AACR, which had been giving the award since an anonymous donor funded it in 1979. "Until last autumn we were unaware of any allegations against Rhoads. The contents of the letter were not acceptable--then or now. They were certainly inappropriate for a physician and should not be associated with this award." This was not the first time that controversy has erupted over Rhoads's letter, although in previous instances the scandal quickly faded. Rhoads, who died in 1959, was among the most respected researchers of his day. He served as chief of the medical division of the Army's chemical warfare unit during World War II, for which he was awarded the Legion of Merit. After heading Memorial Hospital in New York City, he became director of the new Sloan-Kettering Institute in the late 1940s. His work with mustard gas as a tumor-killing agent presaged today's chemotherapy. Rhoads had traveled to Puerto Rico early in his career as part of the Commission for the Study of Anemia funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. He and his colleagues saw more than 250 patients for hookworm-caused anemia and a form of anemia known as tropical sprue. But he chafed at the tropical conditions and relations with the locals, and the feelings apparently worsened over time. On the night of 10 November 1931, Rhoads got drunk at a party, according to witnesses, and emerged to find his car stripped and the tires flat. When he got back to his lab, he wrote the now-famous letter to a colleague in Boston and left it on his desk. The next day a lab assistant found the document, passed copies to colleagues, and later gave a copy to Pedro Albizu Campos, leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. Albizu Campos gave it the widest possible circulation, sending copies to newspapers, embassies, the League of Nations, the Pan American Union, the American Civil Liberties Union--and even the Vatican. To Albizu Campos it revealed the genocidal nature of the American occupation, which he compared to the extermination of Native Americans and the natives of Hawaii. (The United States had invaded Puerto Rico 33 years earlier.) Then-Governor James Beverly characterized the letter as a "confession of murder" and a "libel against the people from Puerto Rico," and he ordered an investigation. The inquiry, conducted by a Puerto Rican district attorney and two local physicians, concluded that Rhoads did not commit the crimes he boasted about in his letter. Rhoads, who had already returned to New York, cabled his apologies to Beverly. He described his letter as a "fantastic and playful composition written entirely for my own diversion and intended as parody"--a spin that not even his American colleagues believed. He offered to return to Puerto Rico to help clear things up, but he never went back and suffered no opprobrium. His superiors and the press dismissed the incident as a case of local ingratitude. Indeed, TIME magazine headlined the incident as "Porto Ricochet" (using the Anglicized spelling of the time), implying that the doctor's noble efforts had come back to bite him. Embraced by his colleagues, Rhoads went on to enjoy an exemplary career. The charges never fully disappeared. In 1950, when two Puerto Rican nationalists attempted to assassinate President Harry Truman, one of them cited the Rhoads letter as his motivation for becoming a militant. In 1982 Pedro Aponte Vázquez, a Puerto Rican social scientist and writer studying at Fordham University in New York City, found new information

in the Rockefeller Foundation and other archives that he felt raised doubts about the earlier investigation. For example, Aponte Vázquez, who is not related to Edwin Vázquez, found a 1932 letter from Beverly to the Rockefeller Foundation's associate director saying that Rhoads had written a second letter "even worse than the first." That document, wrote Beverly, "was suppressed by the Government" and subsequently destroyed. Rhoads's superior, William B. Castle, had conducted a case-by-case investigation of the 13 patients who died during Rhoads's tenure and found nothing suspicious. Aponte Vázquez argues that the evidence he found of a pervasive old-boy attitude suggested that investigators should not have accepted such reports on face value. "Here was a case in which the perpetrator spontaneously wrote a confession, and they did not even exhume the bodies," he says. He had asked the Puerto Rican Justice Department to reopen the case but was told that inasmuch as Rhoads had long since been dead, it was not worth pursuing. He wrote about his findings in a legal journal article and in several books. The case lay dormant for 20 years, until Edwin Vázquez saw the letter last fall. Searching the literature for further clues, he found tenuous links to some controversial experiments that Rhoads's colleagues had conducted in the 1950s and '60s--hardly enough to make a case against Rhoads but enough to fan his own indignation. "I feel a little dazed," he said when informed of the AACR decision. "This was never a political issue for me but a scientific one. The scientific method has to be based on trust, ethics, and confidence. So I feel this decision is a triumph for science." Few people seriously believe that Rhoads injected patients with cancer cells; what shocks some observers is not only the contents of the letter but the collegial treatment Rhoads received after they became public. Susan Lederer, associate professor of the history of medicine at Yale and author of a recent paper about the case, found another report in which Rhoads referred to his Puerto Rican patients as "experimental animals." "There was an incredibly racist element to all this," she says, that his superiors glossed over and the press abetted. Foti says that AACR will continue to offer an award to young researchers, although it has not settled on a new name. AACR will not offer the prize this year but will grandfather this year's entrants into next year's competition, even if the delays take them beyond the prescribed age limit. In the course of making the decision, the board of directors met with the donor who had established the $5000 annual prize to express his admiration for Rhoads. He too had been "totally unaware of the allegations," says Foti. "He was very saddened by the charge and left [the decision] in our hands."

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