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Nobel Prize winners say sites falsely cite research

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Three Nobel Prize-winning scientists have complained to New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer that Web sites are falsely tying their research to the dietary supplements of Mannatech Inc.

The Nobel laureates, members of the faculty at The Rockefeller University in New York, complained early this year after a cease-and-desist letter written to Mannatech on behalf of one of them, Günter Blobel, failed to get results, according to Harriet Rabb, the university's vice president and general counsel.

"Dr. Blobel was the one most vexed by this, because [the use of his name] has gone on the longest and been the most explicit," she said.

Blobel was awarded the Nobel Prize for physiology or medicine in 1999. The other scientists who signed off on the complaint, Paul Greengard and Paul Nurse, won in 2000 and 2001, respectively.

Mannatech, a direct-sales company based in Coppell, sells its products through a network of independent associates, many of whom maintain their own Web sites.

Rabb said she has been informed by the attorney general's office that it is looking into the matter.

Steven Rains, Mannatech's associate general counsel, said the company is dealing with the issue and has been told by the attorney general's office that it is satisfied with the company's efforts.

"We do not expect that this matter will be resolved immediately, nor have we represented to the NY Attorney General's office that this will be anything other than an ongoing process," Rains wrote in an e-mail. "But we have a system in place to address this issue and have committed our time and resources to it."

Paul Larrabee, Spitzer's spokesman, said he could not say whether the matter was being investigated.

Mannatech's products, known as glyconutrients, are a blend of plant extracts developed by the company and said to provide eight sugars essential for health. The company believes the products improve communication between cells, thereby supporting the immune system.

The Web sites that are in question are operated by the company's associates. They assert or imply that the Nobel laureates' research was in glycobiology, a science that deals with sugar molecules.

Blobel received his Nobel Prize for research mapping a so-called "zip code" system for protein distribution within cells. Greengard was honored for his work regarding nerve cells, Nurse for his work dealing with cell cycles.

A cursory search by the *Star-Telegram* in mid-August found eight Web sites selling glyconutrients that included the claim that Blobel's Nobel Prize was for research in glycobiology.

Most used virtually the same language in characterizing Blobel's award and referred to it under such headings as "scientific validation" or "glyconutrient validation." Some carried photos of Blobel and his medal. One included a link to the Nobel announcement itself.

Four of the Web sites contained links to the Mannatech corporate site.

The *Star-Telegram* also found a glyconutrient site that quoted from the announcement of the Nobel Prize shared by Greengard and two others.

"As you can see, glyconutrients form the foundation of our good health," the site stated after quoting from the announcement.

Blobel's cease-and-desist letter was sent to Mannatech in August 2004 after he received numerous queries from people seeking his opinion on whether glyconutrients could treat their illnesses, Rabb said. Since that time, she said, Greengard and Nurse have become aware that their research has also been connected to the selling of the products.

"They were hearing from people they knew who said, 'Are you embarrassed that your name is being used this way?' which they certainly were," Rabb said.

"They also were hearing from people who said, 'I'm desperate. I've got such-and-such disease. If you tell me these things are going to make me well, I'm going to buy these products.' And they were horrified that people might be forgoing traditional therapies to use something that their names were associated with."

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