



## Case: Isolation in the Lab

### Key Phrases:

- Multicultural communication
- Unconscious bias

### The Situation:

Bill, an African American physician recently hired after completion of his residency at an outside institution, was interested in joining a research lab. Wong-Li, an Associate Professor in the department, was assigned to be his mentor. Bill was from rural Georgia, spoke with a noticeable Southern drawl, and liked to fully formulate his thoughts before giving a response. He felt that Wong-Li was impatient with him. Wong-Li emigrated from Shanghai China after completing his MD-PhD, and although he had completed a clinical residency, his primary academic role was as a successful lab-based researcher with a 15-year continuous history of NIH and external agency funding.

Bill received favorable reviews of his clinical work, and patients frequently commented on the amount of time that he spent with them. In the lab, his first project appeared to be going okay, albeit slowly. Wong-Li observed that in the weekly lab meetings, Bill attended, but always sat in the back of the room, and most commonly refrained from contributing.

In Bill's third month in the lab, one particular meeting generated much excitement and established an entirely new focus area for the lab. Bill was not invited to take the lead on two projects in the new focus area, but was sometimes asked to help prepare reagents for the experiments. Six months elapsed, the new lab focus was successful, and two manuscripts were being prepared for the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Bill was not included as a co-author in either of the manuscripts. Bill was concerned because he believed that it was his idea that generated the discussion and the new focus area in the lab and that he had materially participated in the research by preparing some of the reagents for the experiments. Bill went to see the ombudsperson, who said that issues of intellectual property were the most common complaints received in her office. The ombudsperson suggested that Bill initiate a discussion with Wong-Li, particularly regarding any future papers. Because he does not want to be perceived as a complainer, Bill is uncomfortable initiating the discussion. He is experiencing



anxiety, anger, and feelings of vulnerability. Bill asks for a meeting with you, the Vice Chair for Faculty Development of his department.

## Case Questions:

1. What might Wong-Li do to engage Bill in the lab?
2. What might Bill do in his approach to Wong-Li?
3. What might the Vice Chair do to facilitate the interaction and long-term mentoring productivity?