

Tenured McGill University professor fired after accounting 'twirps' uncover \$159,500 in improper spending

MONTREAL — Avi Chaudhuri was an academic star at McGill University who had completed his PhD under a Nobel laureate at UC Berkeley and held a prestigious James McGill professorship recognizing his “scholarly excellence.”

In 2008, when questions were raised about his spending of research money, the psychology professor had little patience for the university-hired auditors who came nosing around.

“I am not going to tell some twirp with an accountancy diploma who my professional colleagues are so that he can call around and embarrass me,” he complained to his dean in December 2008.

“I will also be telling [the auditors] that I feel I have co-operated enough with their process and that I must now devote myself to scholarly work, including finishing up a major book for publication this summer.”

Seven months later, McGill fired Mr. Chaudhuri, and it was the accounting “twirps” who were largely responsible, digging up \$159,500 in improper spending. In a decision rendered March 1, Quebec’s labour relations commission upheld his dismissal, agreeing with the auditors’ finding that the professor “intentionally misused funds in order to obtain personal benefits.”

Mr. Chaudhuri’s downfall began at a time of personal trauma. His mother in Toronto had suffered a debilitating stroke, and in 2004, Mr. Chaudhuri arranged for her to be flown to India so she could die in her homeland. A month before the flight, he used his McGill purchasing card to buy a \$19,500 mattress designed for people with limited mobility.

He said he had shipped the mattress with his mother to be used in a study on stroke victims in India, denying that he had actually bought it for his mother. But the adjudicator hearing the case, Jean Paquette, concluded there was no evidence that Mr. Chaudhuri had ever planned a stroke study. When first questioned, Mr. Chaudhuri initially said the mattress was in a warehouse in India, but he later acknowledged to his dean that it was in an apartment owned by his family in Calcutta.

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The university also examined 14 trips to India that Mr. Chaudhuri made between 2006 and 2008. He charged the university and funding agencies a total of \$140,000 for the trips, but the auditors questioned the legitimacy of the expenses.

The adjudicator concluded that rather than conducting research related to his university position during his travels, Mr. Chaudhuri was working on behalf of PAC Med Biotech, a private consulting company he runs with family members.

"[Mr.] Chaudhuri's version contains too many inconsistencies and implausibilities to be credible and preponderant," Mr. Paquette wrote.

In advising him of his dismissal, McGill principal Heather Munroe-Blum accused Mr. Chaudhuri of misappropriating funds, misrepresenting his activities and showing "blatant disregard" for university rules.

"All of this leads to an irreparable breach of trust upon which the academy is founded and upon which the collegial relationship of professors to their universities depends," she wrote.

Jim Turk, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, said it is rare for a tenured professor to be dismissed in Canada.

The CAUT supported Mr. Chaudhuri's legal challenge and Mr. Turk said Tuesday that he is troubled by the labour relations commission's decision. He said Mr. Chaudhuri is currently in India and does not wish to comment on his case. The CAUT are "reviewing what options there are for him at this point," Mr. Turk said, adding that "the consequences are devastating" for Mr. Chaudhuri.

He said pressure on scientists to combine academic and commercial work has led to a blurring of the lines, and Mr. Chaudhuri's case was anything but clear-cut. "There have to be the kind of clear guidelines that there haven't historically been about how you separate it," he said.