

A medical researcher in Toronto sent intimidating letters to a rival's supporters. He now fears losing his job.

Philip Fine reports

Last year, Gideon Koren was awarded Canada's first chair in child health research. At the end of this month, the professor of clinical pharmacology and toxicology should find out if he will remain on faculty at the University of Toronto and its affiliated Hospital for Sick Children.

The pre-eminent medical researcher has admitted that he sent intimidating letters to supporters of Nancy Olivieri, the blood researcher who has been at the centre of a high-profile clinical trial case.

A disciplinary committee will weigh in on his recent admission that he was the anonymous author of five letters, one of which called Dr Olivieri and her supporters pigs and another that suggested one of the letter's recipients, Peter Durie, should resign.

Dr Koren, who has disputed Dr Olivieri's negative findings on a drug that is intended to take young thalassaemia patients off blood transfusions safely, says a hospital order demanding that no one speak to the media left



Postscript: Nancy Olivieri says the letters subverted the honesty of the drug safety debate

From poison pen to golden handshake

him with no other means of expression. "I came out of huge duress I've been under, and that's not a justification but just the way it was," he told the *National Post* newspaper.

He now admits that the letters were inappropriate and he regrets having sent them.

But Dr Olivieri, who was dismissed in 1990 from her own clinical trials of the drug deferiprone by pharmaceutical company Apotex Inc, and whose university is now being investigated by an academic inquiry looking at whether or not it was negligent in its duties to protect her, does not accept Dr Koren's regrets.

"It is not the one-time angry event of an individual, but a pattern of wrongdoing that has attempted to subvert the whole honesty of the debate in drug safety," Dr Olivieri told a press conference. Her story was profiled on the American television news show *60 Minute*, just before these latest events occurred.

The Israeli-born Dr Koren, who has been with the Toronto hospital for 25 years and has published 600 peer-reviewed papers, says he has been unfairly attacked in the press by Dr Olivieri and her supporters, who employed a private investigator, a linguistics expert and a DNA specialist to track down the letter writer. He announced to colleagues he will take every legal step to protect his reputation and his position.

Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children is the largest hospital-based research institute in Canada, having conducted 200 clinical trials this year.