We Should Know

The young black man has claimed racial profiling and physical abuse at the hands of white Sacramento Sheriff's Department officers. Orintheo Swanigan alleged the deputies weren't enforcing the law but breaking it when they pulled him over for driving while black last week and then beat him up. Serious allegations. We'll probably never know what happened in this case.

There will be an investigation by the very department whose deputies are accused of the wrongdoing. That investigation is clearly biased--its own employees are involved and the county stands to lose big time if a civil case is brought and won. It doesn't take an ethics professor to spot a clear conflict of interest.

The FBI will look into it, but they've already admitted to the media that they'll "follow the sheriff's investigation though not interfering in any way." Hardly an aggressive stance, and besides, federal agents will only look for a violation of civil rights, not possible criminal charges. The district attorney's office could examine it, but they're also biased toward law enforcement. The attorneys and officers work together every day and depend on each other to win cases. Another clear and obvious conflict of interest. There will be no unbiased investigation and review of this matter where citizens will examine the evidence. So we'll never really know.

The other important case looming out there is the death of Donald Venerable Jr. at the hands of Sacramento police officers. Now here an observer might say that a citizen review will get to the bottom of this because of an ongoing investigation by the Office of Police Accountability. But it's not independent and no citizens are involved.

The Office is in the domain of the Sacramento city manager. Again, we have an employee who works for the city investigating city employees. Yet another clear conflict of interest. Beyond that, the office has no subpoena powers and can't conduct a public hearing on the matter. We'll never really have an unbiased look at the information.

When there are serious charges, possibly murder, to be considered, why are departments allowed to investigate their own? At the very least, why aren't police
detectives from an outside department, possibly the state, called in to conduct the investigation?

In more enlightened cities such as San Francisco, the citizens demand to know. Complaints are investigated by a staff of civilians and trained investigators not associated with the police. Verified complaints then go to a Police Commission made up of citizen volunteers who can hand out discipline.

When we turn over to police the power to use physical and even deadly force, it requires public accountability to ensure that the power they have isn’t abused. We believe that there should be a citizen review of all serious accusations. Regardless of color, the people of this region deserve the answers.