

Special Letters to the Editor

Guidelines and Code of Ethics[#]

Sir,

The implementation of Guidelines and Code of Ethics for peers like fellow authors, printed since January 1999 issue of Saudi Medical Journal, is commendable. Instruction to authors and "conflict of interest" are parts of the "uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals."¹ "Peer review" aims to improve quality, prohibit fraud, preserve "intellectual property" and direct money for research; issues which remain "news focus" under review elsewhere.² Such pioneering editorial action is most helpful to science and medicine in particular as it encourages input from unknown authors.

Most materials published nowadays may be reruns of old data. New discoveries inducing breakthrough scientific advances may be based on concepts which come from somewhere unexpected and not necessarily from research centres and countries of excellence. Discoveries occur against odds and challenge a received wisdom. It is conceived by observation, implanted in a "lone" mind, stimulated by challenge and feeds on dedicated painstaking work and insomnia.

Concepts, however, could easily be "borrowed" but impossible to return. Discoveries compliment, but are not synonymous with, scientific advances and inventions, as it cannot be patented. Validation through competent scientific research may take years but well equipped teams may reproduce and print it in months. For reasons which have been comprehensively exposed,³⁻⁵ the implementation of "open peer review" is a most welcomed step.

David F. Horrobin, Editor of Medical Hypothesis, is the pioneer who was first to ask: "What is peer review for?" Current materialization of "open peer review" was seeded 25 years ago.³ His answer: "Quality control, but it works best when nothing of importance is at stake and is a hinder to scientific innovation".⁴ Like the unknown innovative scientists, he tried to bring to the attention of peers and editors, he was left "unwept, unhonored and unsung" (Walter Scott).

It is unusual that the main regulatory process for scientific research and publication to lack regulations, particularly in societies that strive on science and has a system that works for regulating everything from rocket launching to supermarket shopping. Every judge rules by law and juries verdict. Editors are the judges in science. Peers are

the juries and though by definition have a vested interest, unlike in law they should not withdraw.

No appology for the corrupt. No profession is immune. The corrupt will always be back after finding new loop holes. Honest peers have nothing to fear. They know that comments which cannot be said openly, with references, are not worth saying at all. They recognize old from new. Professor Stehbens has laid foundations for new regulations and warned against "over regulations," leaving honest peers, like innovative authors, with little room to breath.⁵

As always, a minority of corrupts forces in regulations. The honest majority suffer most and bear the cost. But, should they? If not, who should pay? Scientists should be spared as doctors' altruism should be to the individual patient's care based on evidence-based ethical medicine. Before the whole scientific process of "clinical" research becomes only feasible on a "computer simulation", such issues and others must be also considered.³⁻⁵

In a world currently manipulated by the "lahlooh"[§] how can honest peers, editors, authors and doctors, such as judges, keep intellectual integrity, compassion, fairness and altruism without having financial independence and safety of intellectual property? The scientific process, such as medicine itself should not be commercialized, valued or manipulated by the "lahlooh". It aims "to cure sometimes, to relieve often and to comfort always".⁴

[§]"Lahlooh" is a fictitious international currency unit with roots in Egyptian folklore; meaning: the thing which manipulates all others without ethics, moral or religion.

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