# LETTERS

## "Trust the researchers": flying in the face of evidence

There are always rival hypotheses to explain away the one that is posited as the most likely to be true. Context and Occam's razor – the principle that among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected – ultimately point to which hypothesis is the most likely to be true.

Ian Harris (1) shows his hand when suggesting that Mark Wilson (2) is invoking a "conspiracy theory" to explain the relationship between the editorial and financial staff at the *NEJM*. Organisations usually have a culture that blends their production and financial staff. The CEO is attentive to inputs received from all staff, especially those responsible for keeping track of money. It is far-fetched to suggest that the interactions between a journal editor and the editorial and financial staff when reaching decisions point to some kind of "conspiracy". Occam's razor abhors complicated explanations when the simplest explanation will suffice. Conspiracy theory, indeed!

That said, Ian Harris reveals his bias when he says, "I do not think that the role of journals is to check the data supplied by authors. They may be sceptical in some cases, but at the end of the day, they have to trust the authors; it is not possible for them to check the data contained within each article. We all have to trust the researchers."

"Trust the researchers" . . . now that is fantastical thinking in the face of the avalanche of evidence which demonstrates that researchers are less than trustworthy (3). There is also evidence to suggest that some journal editors provide cover for authors who manipulate their results and report biased findings (4).

Besides, empirical science demands replicability, and how would one be able to replicate without fully knowing the nitty-gritty of the methods and procedures that produce the data on which "findings" are based?

"Trust but verify", the now famous reminder of former US President Ronald Reagan to Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1987 after signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, is a better guide to evaluating researchers' claims.

Journals proceed at their own risk if they rely on the trustworthiness of the authors. Why bother to subject a manuscript to peer review instead of simply asking the author to certify "trustworthiness" in some way or the other? Perhaps one could go by an honest face and earnest gaze. To rely on the trustworthiness of an author is a fool's errand, considering the repeated revelations that pharmaceutical companies routinely write reports and recruit high-status academic leaders to lend their signatures to these reports (5).

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## Is MCI over emphasising publication for promotion of medical teachers?

Over the past year, there has been constant debate in various journals on the circular issued by the Medical Council of India (MCI) in September 2015, regarding the requirements for promotion of teaching faculty. The lack of a time-bound promotion system of medical faculty results in higher stress, dissatisfaction, lower productivity and quality of life and work. The critics have highlighted several issues in assessment of publication for teacher's promotion, eg the exclusion of publications in "electronic-only" journals, awarding points only to "original research" papers and first or second authors, listing of indexing databases for journals, categorising journals as national or international (1, 2). The relevance of a journal's impact factor as a measure for assessment of publication has also been appraised (1). Thereafter, the Indian Association of Medical Editors has recommended revised guidelines which include a revised list of indexing databases, types of papers and authorship as criteria for assessment of publications (2). Recently, serious issues in research infrastructure and funding and lack of uniformity in medical education in the country have been reported. About 57.3% medical colleges did not have a single publication in the decade 2005-2014, whereas only 4.3% institutes have published 40.3% of the total publications (3). Despite a scarcity of research publications, India has been ranked highest for the rate of research misconduct globally (4). Surprisingly, even scientists at the premier institutes in the country have been implicated in such activities (4). Mandatory publication for promotion may give rise to more plagiarism, unethical research reporting practices, authorship controversies and burn out of researchers. Further, publication as the only accountable incentive for teachers may take them away from academic and clinical duties. Teaching