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Randoms

To the Best of Our Knowledge

There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know.
Harry S. Truman

The title was titillating: "A New Method to Detect Uncouth Behavior." The authors' new method involved something akin to the Babinski reflex—stroke an author's ego and the uncouth always raise their eyebrows. These authors claimed to be the first to observe this response and did put the disclaimer in the discussion "we are not aware of anything like this previously reported in the literature."

The authors of this "new approach" tested 60 individuals suspected of the targeted behavior and detected three positive responses (confirmed by PET imaging of the Nucleus Hubris). As an expert in this type of behavior, however, I was sure that there had been other published reports on this reflex. A quick review of my files produced copies of these reports, where various approaches to ego stroking were tested on a total of over one thousand subjects. The previously published reports described double blind studies, good control measurements and provided a thorough review of the literature. Unfortunately, for the authors of the study I was reviewing, in addition to their original claims of primacy, they had failed to cite these important and relevant studies. These oversights dramatically reduced the value of their manuscript.

Later, as I drafted my comments to the editor, a feeling of sadness overtook me. If the authors had done their homework and contained their egos, this could have had a different outcome.

Manuscript review requires the dedication and time of many experts in each area of endeavor. Many reviewers perform this task in their spare time—after completing their day's work. Each reviewer has his/her pet peeves as does every editor. When one of those elements is identified in a manuscript, it pushes a hot button. One common pet peeve is the claim of primacy. Claims of first or best are immodest. It is the rare individual who can claim full knowledge of the world's medical literature. Such a complete knowledge would be necessary to know what is first or best. The qualifying statement "To our knowledge..." only adds a lamentable note to a statement that need not clutter an otherwise well done scientific report.

The scientist is best served by objective reporting, fitting yet another piece into the puzzle and reporting "just the facts." Mixing objective reporting with unsupportable claims does not add comfort to the reader, but rather rings of hollow self-aggrandizement. Historians will place events in perspective and determine whether a contribution deserves the title of "first," "best" or "newest."

The moral of the story is clear: leave history to the historians. Make no claims that are not supported by your data.

For the past three years this *Journal* has had an unpublished policy that has not allowed claims of primacy. That policy will now be formalized in our instructions to authors. We are not the first to take this step, but to the best of our knowledge, neither are we the last.

H. William Strauss, Editor
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