

What I'm Reading (July 2)



By *Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA* — July 2, 2020

An interview with the editor of The Lancet where he explains those recent retractions. A story of an ecologic problem in the voice of Rudyard Kipling. A query into fishy meanings of a name.



Image courtesy of StockSnap on Pixabay [1]

I've written on the Lancet's publication, and subsequent retraction of a paper on COVID-19 and hydroxychloroquine and I was hoping this article about the Lancet's editor might include an explanation and apology. I was mistaken. Worse yet, my hidden fear of a political agenda seems to have some basis. And one more thought, it was early in Horton's tenure that the Lancet produced a study by a certain Andrew Wakefield, that sparked the modern anti-vaccine movement.

“During the pandemic, Horton has sought to merge almost entirely the scientific mission of The Lancet with a political purpose, while allowing each side to proceed by a different method. “One part of that story, we’re trying to deal with it in as objective a way as possible, and make judgments only about the science,” he told me. “But, at the same time, we’re trying to constantly assess and arrive at some preliminary conclusion or verdict about the political response. And that is obviously not objective. That is clearly political and requires a subjective and often deeply emotional response.”

...

Horton said that something like this happens every few years. “In some ways, this is normal science,” he said. “Science is not immune to having bad people. There are bad people in society, and there are bad people in Science. Science is very vulnerable to deceit. . . . When somebody submits a paper to The Lancet, the first thing I think is not, Do I need to consider research misconduct?” He acknowledged the political appeal of the hydroxychloroquine study, in light of Trump’s remarks. “It certainly excited our editors and peer reviewers about the possibility of answering that question,” Horton said. “And we all made a collective error, and that collective mistake was to believe what we were being told.”

From the New Yorker, [The Lancet Editor’s Wild Ride Through the Coronavirus Pandemic](#) [2]

Perhaps I was primed for this article because I am reading [Entangled Life](#) [3] by Merlin Sheldrake, which is about fungus and is very good at jostling your preconceptions. But here is a tale in connecting evolutionary dots, told in the style of Rudyard Kipling, the Jungle Book guy.

“I’m going to imitate Rudyard Kipling and tell you a just-so story. Kipling was one of the most popular writers in the world 100 years ago. He wrote The Jungle Book. And also, Just So Stories, which began as bedtime stories he told his daughter Josephine. They were about how animals got their famous features, like the camel’s hump and the leopard’s spots. Kipling was a wonderful writer but he made up his animal stories. My story is based on Science, which means many people, through many recent experiments, have concluded things might “just so” be the way of this story.

It’s also a story about evolution, which is nature’s research and development department. Like Kipling, I’ve given a human voice to certain things: Bacteria form committees and petition the research and development department for answers to their problems, as do plants and dinosaurs. And the R&D department (which is to say, evolution) tries to come up with solutions. I’m going to call evolution “Mr. R&D.” When he finds a problem, Mr. R&D tests things out in different ways to come up with a solution. But sometimes those solutions have unforeseen consequences. So here we go!”

From Nautil. Us, [Why Birds Can Fly Over Mount Everest](#) [4]

“Ideas are like fish. If you want to catch little fish, you can stay in the shallow water. But if you want to catch the big fish, you’ve got to go deeper. Down deep, the fish are more powerful and more pure. They’re huge and abstract. And they’re very beautiful.”

—David Lynch, [Catching The Big Fish](#) [5] Quotation gratefully stolen from [Austin Kleon](#) [6]

Finally, categories, like what constitutes a species, are arbitrary human conceptions, conceptions altered by not just our “scientific knowledge” but our culture.

“When a fish—or any animal—is removed from its wild habitat and domesticated over generations for human consumption, it changes—both the fish and our perception of it. The farmed and wild both say “salmon” on their labels, but are they both equally “salmon?” When does the label no longer apply?

This crisis of identity is ours to sort out; not the fish’s. For us, the salmon is an icon of the wild, braving thousand-mile treks through rivers and oceans, leaping up waterfalls to spawn or be caught in the clutches of a grizzly bear. The name “salmon” is likely derived from the Latin word, “salire,” to leap. But it’s a long way from a leaping wild salmon to schools of fish swimming in circles in dockside pens. Most of the salmon we eat today don’t leap and don’t migrate.”

From Nautil.us, [Is Farmed Salmon Really Salmon?](#) [7]

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