Hank Campbell in the WSJ on the consequences of corruption of peer review

By ACSH Staff — July 14, 2014

Perhaps spurred by last week’s seismic announcement by Sage Publications[1] that it was retracting 60(!) papers from one of their journals, Science 2.0 founder Hank Campbell wrote a scathing opinion piece on the decline of the peer review process, which appears in today’s Wall Street Journal[2].

Here are some especially compelling quotes:

[I]n biomedicine faulty research and a dubious peer-review process can have life-or-death consequences.

Regarding papers where researchers use questionable methods:

Papers with such problems or omissions would never see the light of day if sound peer-review practices were in place and their absence at many journals is the root of the problem. Peer review involves an anonymous panel of objective experts critiquing a paper on its merits.

A timely, and almost funny example:

Absent rigorous peer review, we get the paper published in June in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Titled Female hurricanes are deadlier than male hurricanes, it concluded that hurricanes with female names cause more deaths than male-named hurricanes ostensibly because implicit sexism makes people take the storms with a woman’s name less seriously. The work was debunked once its methods were examined, but not before it got attention nationwide.

While this example is a bit...whimsical, there are several other more concerning instances of the dangerous absence of critical thinking allowing both poor quality and politically- or agenda-driven pieces (often both) to be published in seemingly respected journals without apparent irony. Some journals eagerness to buy into one anti-pesticide crusader’s rants and publish them as if they were sound science is one such, says ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross.
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