From the Editor

Malleus Malefactorum

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The other day, we discovered that the author of a submitted paper appeared to have cribbed some of his discussion from a web site belonging to someone else. These things happen, from time to time, and each case is different: the magnitude of the sin ranges from cardinal to venial.

Consider a spate of review articles on drug delivery technologies submitted a few years ago to another journal of which I was then editor. There seemed to be dozens of them, though in reality there were only five or six. All came from second-rank technical universities in a single country (which we will not, for now, identify), and all seemed to be the products of a highly systematized process. The method was simple: type a topic into Medline, download the titles and abstracts, do a minimal rewrite (generally by turning active voice to passive and passive to active), and string the results together. Voila, there you have your review, ready for publication.

Once we learned the pattern, these automated reviews were fairly easy to spot and reject.

But it was uncomfortable to realize just how much journals depend on the good faith and candor of their scientific communities—and how vulnerable they are to willful deceit.

Research misconduct of any kind is profoundly depressing. Every time it happens, it comes as a shock. The outrage mixes with a whisper of sympathy, to make a disorienting cocktail. “What if there’s an innocent explanation?” asks a little voice, to which a louder voice rejoins, “How dare they!”

One can’t help imagining the forces that might drive a researcher into this sort of career-destroying crime. Sure, it’s easy to loathe a conscienceless fraud—fabricating or stealing data for personal gain, for the sake of a big grant or a fat venture investment.

But one imagines other cases, as well: the desperately exhausted post-doc out of his depth, panicking because his experiment has collapsed yet again, who makes up data to support results he knows *have* to be true, just to make the pain of failure go away. The bewil-

dered non-English speaker who borrows a phrase, and then a sentence, and finally whole paragraphs from the web or an out-of-the-way journal, because they explain the case far better than she ever could. Confronting cases like these first-hand, or even writing about them second-hand (as we must too often do in our newsletter), is dispiriting.

But is forgiveness possible, since intentional falsehood had caused so much damage, and the literature, once polluted, is so hard to cleanse?

Consider just one recent case. At the beginning of February, the *Sunday Times* of London (1) alleged that the lead author had falsified data underlying an influential 1998 *Lancet* article (2). The paper linked autism and colitis with MMR (mumps, measles, and rubella) vaccination in twelve children, claiming that signs of autism appeared shortly after vaccination. In fact, said the *Times*, the children’s medical records showed that the first symptoms of autism appeared well before or well after vaccination. The initial 1998 paper fueled parents’ fears of vaccination, and sent UK vaccination rates plummeting. The result: in 1998, England and Wales saw 56 cases of measles. In 2008, there were 1,348.

The literature is now corrected, but the damage is done. While one hates to fall back on proverbs, it seems that in publishing, as in medicine, an ounce of prevention really is worth a pound of cure.

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References

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