

SPOT THE MEDICAL FRAUD

The WDDTY weekly letter

We occasionally get accosted by a self-proclaimed sceptic who tells us things like: “There’s nothing better than a robust, double-blind placebo study.”

Aside from revealing the aridity of their lives, our sceptics cling to the ideals of medical science, which regular readers will know is an oxymoron. Medicine is a craft that dresses itself in the raiment of science, and, even then, science isn’t what it used to be.

In case you’re still in doubt, take a look at a new book that came to our attention this week. Despite its sleep-inducing title, ‘Unreliable: Bias, Fraud and the Reproducibility Crisis in Biomedical Research’(Columbia University Press, 2025), the book is dynamite, and it’s written by one of the biggest cheeses in medical research, Csaba Szabo. He’s the head of the Pharmacology Section and President of the Department of Oncology, Microbiology and Immunology at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, and he’s one of the world’s most cited researchers.

He paints a worrying picture. So-called medical research is a farrago of comedy, mistakes, fraud, gain and aggrandisement, and its fuel is pharmaceutical money and career advancement. Pure science is left bleeding and dying at the laboratory door.

For instance, cell lines are the building blocks of biomedical research. Sometimes they come from humans, sometimes from animals—but in 5 percent of instances, the lines are mixed up, and what a lab thought were cells from the lungs of a human in fact came from the pancreas of a mouse. No going back from that, and so any results will be meaningless (not that that has ever been an impediment to a drug company pushing a new drug).

Szabo has been a regular spectator of medical fraud. He’s often asked to ‘peer review’ papers that clearly contain fraud, and his own research has been plagiarised and republished in dodgy publications run from a basement in places like Rawalpindi.

He has also had direct experience of fraud. One of the junior members at his lab faked images and did so repeatedly for several medical journals. But fraud isn’t the preserve of the junior researchers. Marc Tessier-Lavigne was promoted to president of Stanford University before it was discovered that several studies he’d published when he was a lab researcher contained fake data. Faced by overwhelming evidence, he resigned in 2023.

Then there is the Nobel Prize-winning cancer researcher who has had 13 papers retracted, all for potentially fraudulent results.

These papers were ‘peer reviewed’ before they were published, so why weren’t these fraudulent data picked up then? As Szabo points out, reviewers are busy people who may be more focused on getting their own research published, fraudulent or

otherwise. As reviewers don't get paid for their labours, there isn't much incentive to spend time on the work of others.

Fraud is so endemic that whole papers have been made up, as former BMJ editor Richard Smith revealed in a famous blog article from 2021, entitled: Time to assume that health research is fraudulent until proven otherwise?

In one incident, he relates how "Ian Roberts, professor of epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, began to have doubts about the honest reporting of trials after a colleague asked if he knew that his systematic review showing the mannitol halved death from head injury was based on trials that had never happened. He didn't, but he set about investigating the trials and confirmed this. They all had a lead author who purported to come from an institution that didn't exist and who killed himself a few years later. The trials were all published in prestigious neurosurgery journals and had multiple co-authors. None of the co-authors had contributed patients to the trials, and some didn't know that they were co-authors until after the trials were published".

Back to the plaint of our typical sceptic, who say there is nothing better than a double-blind, placebo study. As Gandhi said about Western civilisation, it might be a good idea.

The WDDTY Editors