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We must resist as Trump takes aim at science

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Last year Robert F Kennedy Jr, now the US health secretary, ordered medical journals to “start publishing real science and stop retracting the real science.” Now, after delivering 100 days of global disruption, Donald Trump’s administration has aimed its wrecking ball at medical and scientific journals (doi:10.1136/bmj.r812).¹ In the minds of Trump and his chosen health leaders there is “good science” and “bad science,” good scientists and bad scientists.

Inevitably, Trump’s team believe themselves to be the good guys: defenders of free speech and open debate, standing defiantly against the tyrannical rule of medical journals and their fiendishly “woke” editors. The truth indeed is stranger than fiction; dystopia is reality.

Medical journals, by tradition and practice, are some of the most conservative publications in the world—US journals particularly so. Journals are in the debate business, and a “good” journal should be open to differing views. However, journals also have a responsibility not to publish unsubstantiated arguments or bad science. There’s no duty on medical journals to pander to false equivalence. If you seek to prevent covid by drinking disinfectant, to rely on herd immunity to reduce covid deaths, or to pin autism on the MMR vaccine, a medical journal isn’t the place for you. Unfortunately, even bad papers will be published somewhere. It’s just that authors imagine that their brilliant work will appear in the journal they want to publish in.

Even leading journals sometimes publish poor arguments and poor science despite their best efforts—just as all policy makers, despite their best efforts, can make bad policy. No editorial process is perfect. Problems with science often come to light after publication, and journals have the option of retracting a paper for reasons of research misconduct or major methodological flaws that produce misleading findings. Demanding retraction, however, has also become the first port of call for readers who disagree with an argument or are unwilling to accept the findings of a study. These are not reasons for retraction.

Journals were once reluctant to retract because of the fear of reputational damage and sometimes editorial arrogance. The perilous nature of today’s publishing ecosystem has meant that journals are besieged by greater levels of fraud and misconduct. Appropriate retraction, after due process, is now essential and can be a marker of quality—although journals that retract a high number of papers through a lack of editorial diligence are a matter of concern (doi:10.1136/bmj.p1424).² Flawed science damages the scientific record, misinforms clinical guidance, and results in harm to public finances and population health.

New research finds that retracted papers continue to be included in systematic reviews and that, if the systematic reviews are redone without those papers, the findings are altered in a worrying proportion of instances (doi:10.1136/bmj-2024-082068).³ An accompanying editorial calls for a more aggressive approach to sharing information about retracted papers, removing those papers from systematic reviews, and reanalysing the reviews to see if they should be corrected or retracted (doi:10.1136/bmj.r724).⁴ The *BMJ* supports these proposals and will be issuing a new policy on them. The scientific community must engage with and act on this issue.

Retraction is an important and powerful option for medical journals, but it must be based on matters of science and not political ideology. Under the pretence of championing high editorial values, the Trump administration has now written to US medical journals, including the *New England Journal of Medicine*—the most prestigious journal in the US, if not the world (doi:10.1136/bmj.r835).⁵ The unsent message in these legal letters is that the administration is seeking to impose its ideology on what medical journals publish or, at least, to bully them into avoiding publishing articles that oppose the government’s narrative and intentions.

This is an abuse of power and must be condemned. What might seem like a small step for Trump and his fellow protagonists is a giant leap towards further irreparably damaging American science. The strength of its scientific ecosystem once made America a global superpower (doi:10.1136/bmj.r836),⁶ and it can make America great again—but Trump’s first 100 days have destroyed the foundations of 100 years’ scientific progress and pre-eminence.

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2 Abbasi K. Retract or be damned: a dangerous moment for science and the public. *BMJ* 2023;381: <https://www.bmj.com/content/381/bmj.p1424>doi: 10.1136/bmj.p1424

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