



Observations of the Owl (14)

# Paper Heroes

**M**y beak dropped wide open and my eyes dilated like saucers when I read of the unbelievable scandal that happened at the Medical University of Innsbruck only a couple of months ago. I think you've already heard of the case: The clinical trial of a stem-cell treatment for urinary incontinence (no problem, incidentally, for us

owls) had revealed some serious flaws. What followed was an incredibly muddy tug-of-war between University officials, Austrian science bodies and *The Lancet* (where the study had appeared). In the end, the respected rector of the Medical University, Clemens Sorg, who had gone public with the problems, was fired on very dubious grounds.

However, this was not the reason I spent several minutes shaking my head with a gaping-wide beak. No, no! What completely perplexed me was rather the role and behaviour of the senior author and Chairman of the Department of Urology at the Medical University of Innsbruck, Georg Bartsch. During the investigations he repeatedly stated that he had no part in the study and was only included as senior author "in honour of my seniority". Have you ever heard of a more infamous case of unjustified honorary authorship? Particularly since, in the meantime, it has surfaced that Bartsch quickly tried to weasel out of the situation as soon as things started to become a little more turbid. According to *The Lancet*, Bartsch requested as early as July that his name be withdrawn from the paper "for several reasons". Simply incredible.

*The Lancet* took a firm stand when writing in an editorial that "using gift authorship as an excuse for not taking responsibility for research when serious flaws are uncovered should not be tolerated." And its closing sentence has all the qualities of a mission statement: "With credit comes responsibility – always."

When I had resumed my balance to some degree, this whole case suddenly reminded me of a conversation on the same topic during a small and hearty conference last year. Grateful for the chance to turn my thoughts to something more appealing, I instantly revived my memory...

The conference took place in a very beautiful and secluded forest glade, the optimum place to hold a meeting of avian scientists and thinkers. I am sure this absolutely idyllic setting played a major role in achieving the meeting's ultimately highly inspiring atmosphere, which surely also paved the way for the discussion I had one night with my old pals Falcon, Red Kite and Buzzard. You know how these things usually drag on into the nights following exciting meeting sessions. You are still rather euphoric, the adrenaline keeps rushing through your veins, your brain rotates at high speed and you keep talking, talking, talking...

I think it was Buzzard who, for some incongruous reason, steered the discussion toward grubby papers and research misconduct. And from one second to the next she became so upset that she was finally on the verge of tears (imagine the following

in Buzzard's high-pitched shriek), "Hey, the root of this evil lies with the authors. How many authors sign papers they have contributed nothing to? For example, take that bad habit – particularly in medical papers – where big-shot bosses put their names on every paper coming out of their departments. Check out the databases! The most impertinent of these fellows "publish" a paper every week. Oh pleeeez! That can't be true! I bet, for the most part, that these 'paper heroes' know less about the contents of their publications than a chicken would."

It was late and Red Kite had already consumed quite a few of those colourful drinks with little umbrellas and other funky stuff, so he just nodded obligingly and bemoaned with a frown, "Rrr-right! Most of us do know about this. But what can we do? How, hrrrm, can we prove that those bad eggs don't really contribute to the papers they sign? Ahhh, I think I'm too tired to figure out a solution."

Falcon, however, suddenly curled his beak into a smile. "Funny," he said, "I came across the same kind of discussion at a meeting earlier this year. We were a mixed bunch perched in the branches of a huge pine tree and there was this attractive female from the Blue Mountains near Sydney. I won't tell you more about her, except..."

"Ah, come on!" I urged and shot him a piercing glance from the depth of my big night eyes.

"No chance," Falcon was adamant. "I'll only give you what she revealed had recently happened in her faculty. They had exposed a prime example of a 'paper hero' in one of their departments. The grumbling in the faculty had become increasingly louder over his conspicuously opulent publication list, until one day, the dean of the faculty called upon him to speak publicly about the results of two or three of "his" papers. The crux of the matter, however, was that this guy wasn't told exactly which papers of his complete oeuvre he should present, until immediately before the talk. Well, as the lady explained, this went down a treat. Most of his talk was an embarrassing babble and the audience, the majority of whom recognised what the whole farce was about, sat back in amusement and had a good laugh."

"Nice story," I agreed. "However, were there any consequences? After all, the Australians still had nothing concrete in their hands against the guy."

"Yes, that's true," Falcon responded. "Nevertheless, don't underestimate the effect. I think this guy was discredited rather effectively and his bloated ego received a severe blow. Perhaps more importantly, however, from that time on he knew that his colleagues and the community would be watching him very carefully – like a hawk!"

"Hmm, maybe you're right", I wondered aloud ... only to be suddenly and quite definitely interrupted by Red Kite with the next round of drinks. This time it was a blue one with a yellow umbrella...

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