

## Research for Research's Sake?

Dear Readers,

The main goal of doing research is to find a solution for a problem or to test a hypothesis. This seems to be straightforward and very logical. However, the world has become more complicated. Unfortunately, research today is not only done to satisfy the researchers' curiosity or to find a solution to a problem. Many other factors have sometimes become more important, thus perverting the research ideal. In a society which tries to measure everything in units and in which the main driving force is money, behavior within the scientific community has changed, and very obviously, this has led to certain practices that are actually detrimental to the original idea of research. Just a few examples may illustrate this thought.

- Research is used as a means to bring money into the university/department as grants. This has led to a severe decrease in the effectivity of the university, which was certainly not the intention of those who fostered the grant concept. Let us assume the acceptance rate of grant proposals is 10%, which is seen as a sign of high standards. Although this may be true, it is also a sign of unproductively binding resources, because on average, the authors write 9 applications for the waste basket in order to get one hit. Furthermore, evaluators (peers) are kept very busy determining which proposal is worth funding. Sometimes I have the feeling that new research fields are created just in order to be able to run entire series of grant applications.
- An increasing number of university administrations measure the quality of the research as a basis for all resource allocations. The number of papers and their impact factors are the measuring tool. This puts the researchers into a position of having to maximize output in terms of numbers of papers.
- Within the university environment, research is only valid if it is published and therefore accessible to the community. Therefore, publishing is by definition an important task for every researcher. However, again the number of publications in combination with the impact factor is seen as a gauge for the personal career. Therefore, sometimes the ego becomes a more central issue than the scientist's true curiosity!

- The flip side of the situations mentioned above is that research strategies are developed to "optimize" the yield. Papers are divided up into the smallest publishable unit, or in other words, the salami tactic is applied in publishing.
- Other researchers have a particular tool or a set of tools which are applied in all possible variants, independent of true research questions, just to generate a large mass of papers. This is reflected in the fact that one very common complaint of reviewers is that a clear reason/hypothesis for the research work is missing. About 30 years ago, the Swiss physician and author Walter Vogt wrote a satire about science in medicine, titled "Der Wiesbadener Kongress". In it, he stated that scientists who have a machine to detect positive particles do research with positive particles. Once they obtain a machine to detect negative particles, negative particles become the main target of interest. Unfortunately, this is often reality today.

The consequences of this changed behavior in publishing are surely not positive. We see an inflation in the number of manuscripts, which forces the print journals to reject more and more manuscripts, with decreasing efficiency in the editorial office. Furthermore, readers have a harder time than ever sorting out the relevant and important information from the mass of published papers. I personally think that especially senior scientists should teach our young researchers to go back to the roots of science: first go to the clinic, identify the problems relevant to the health of our patients, and then think about meaningful experiments in order to solve the problems and improve the quality of care. Publishing large numbers of scientific papers alone does not make a good university teacher and clinician!

Sincerely yours,



J.-F. Roulet  
Editor-in-Chief