

Summary points

We apologise that our attempt to describe variants of poor research is clearly a mess, noble ladies and gentlemen, but we cannot help it

Five new authors appear on the day a manuscript is to be submitted

A non-randomised study miraculously becomes randomised after its completion

A young lady laments her onerous love affair with evidence based medicine

Constant faith in bad research is rewarded

Heroic investigators overcome all statistical obstacles to meet a submission deadline

A statistician with a pure heart fails to massage appropriately his mistress (the data) and is dismissed

A young researcher fails to become prime knight-defender of the medical-industrial complex and descends into gloomy anonymity

A study sponsor proves his open and scientifically inquisitive mind in seeking ways to sell a product

The pious members of a most honourable board of a governmental agency grant all the funding to themselves

A valiant academic leader reflects on the difficult paths of academia and renews his uncompromising faith in research, provided it sells for a good price

ignorance. But then, everybody knew that the candidate had done nothing until two weeks ago—yet here was a completed thesis. Where did this come from? Gabriotto asked for the data records. “Records?” Saladin smiled, “Let’s have a beer, my friend. Trust me, we have a big heart, who needs records?” Gabriotto also realised that the one piece of any worth in the thesis had actually been defended recently by another fellow. Whose work was it? “Take it easy, my friend,” Saladin replied, “We are all one big family.”

Gabriotto didn’t feel like family. Yet, a touch of gentle family pressure (simply Gabriotto’s private and

public annihilation, no more than that) helped approve the thesis. Saladin regretted that Gabriotto could not understand that fetching and carrying for your Master makes for excellent scientific training. His skilled protégés would always get well paid jobs in circles where the virtue of servility is still highly valued.

Other academic leaders had relied on religious faith. In the “martyrdom tenure track,” when Saladin was young, a professorship cost roughly 20 000 bent knees. The aspiring young faculty had an excellent chance of promotion after making 40 bent knees per mass in 500 masses, making sure he is always in front of the eyes of the pious members of the promotion committee. Yet faith has deteriorated since, so current junior faculty members should not dare think of promotion without a minimum of 100 000 bent knees to their superiors. Still others had exploited their solid devotion to specific political parties, nightclubs, football teams, or combinations thereof.

Pitiful old style. Saladin could adjust his beliefs as requested. He befriended everyman, to undermine everybody blocking his way. His power was money and dexterity to avoid competition unless he knew the winner before the call for proposals. Only idiots apply for grants with 10% acceptance rate when funds are a telephone call away. Telephones beat super accelerators as research tools. Well, enough of that reverie, time to dial the first number for the day.

Let us leave this academic leader do his serious business: the edification, progress, and overall advancement of mankind rest on his touch pad. And let us end these sad stories here, noble ladies and gentlemen. Forgive our insolence, “if in reading any of these tales you find any pleasure.”

Contributors: Both authors contributed tales and worked on the final text. VWB made the first contact, and JPAI had the idea of paying tribute to the great early Renaissance writer and is responsible for formulating the style in this miserable piece. We also sadly confess that the first meeting of the two plotting investigators did not happen in Santa Maria Novella in Florence or at some nice estate near the most beautiful city in the world (as we get no funding from the industry, so we could not afford this), but at a family restaurant at Rockville, MD, close to the NIH campus. The rest of the project was performed electronically from a distance. The quotations in the first and last sentences of this piece copy the original *Decameron* of Giovanni Boccaccio verbatim.

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An awkward patient

In 1964, I was working in partnership in south east London. My partner had such a friendly personality that, even though I was the senior partner and had founded the practice, he attracted patients to him. I was therefore not surprised one evening to hear a deaf elderly woman loudly demanding to see him. However, I was surprised to hear her response when the receptionists had shouted that it was my partner’s half day and that only I was available: “I don’t want to see that bleeder Dr Crown, he’s bloody useless.”

I was shocked. I knew this patient well and had visited her regularly at her home, a stone’s throw from the surgery, over the years. She was a cantankerous old dear and as deaf as a doorpost, but we had always been on friendly terms, and I had never quarrelled with her.

After considerable argument, she eventually shouted to the receptionists that, although she was dissatisfied and hated me, she had no choice and would see me because she required urgent attention.

Despite the fact that no one in the premises could have failed to hear her comments, and the patients in the waiting room were splitting their sides with laughter, I felt obliged to pretend that I had heard nothing when I ushered her into my room with a large smile. She greeted me with the words, “I hate you, I do. Do you want to know why? You kept my old bugger alive you did.”

It was then I understood. Her poor husband had had a heart attack eight weeks previously, and my treatment had saved his life.

Isidore W Crown *semi-retired general practitioner, Forest Hill, London*