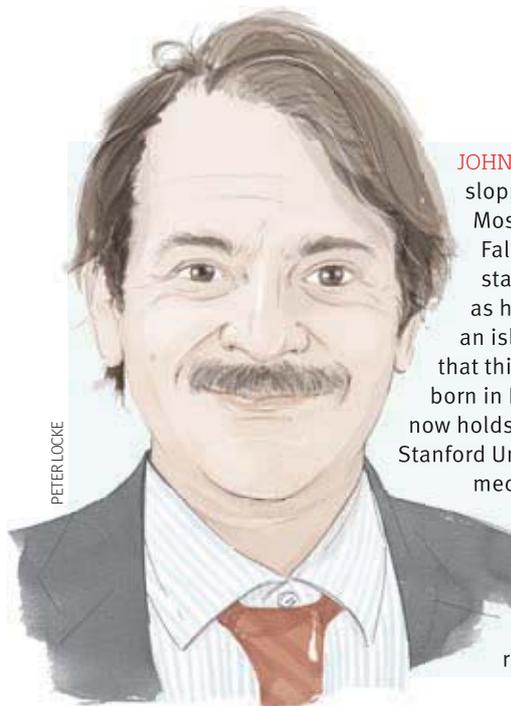


John Ioannidis

Uncompromising gentle maniac



JOHN IOANNIDIS, 50, is the scourge of sloppy science, whose 2005 paper *Why Most Published Research Findings are False* has achieved near legendary status. He recalls his rising excitement as he wrote the paper while on Sikinos, an island in the Cyclades, and the feeling that things were falling into place. He was born in New York, grew up in Greece, and now holds the chair in disease prevention at Stanford University, California. His dim view of medical science, radical in 2005, has since been supported by many empirical studies, the latest showing that 97% of head to head industry sponsored non-inferiority trials back the sponsor's drug—a result he describes as “very curious.”

What is your pet hate?

“Petty politicians and people who seek power in general. Yet, I thank them for demonstrating their incompetence so often and so vividly: it makes me laugh”

What was your earliest ambition?

To become an astronaut, Zorro, or a scientist.

Who has been your biggest inspiration?

The late Tom Chalmers, the great champion of randomised trials and meta-analyses with whom I had the pleasure to work in his last years in Boston. I remember him pacing up and down the room in our brainstorming meetings, fresh with new ideas, even though he had terminal cancer.

What was the worst mistake in your career?

Hard to pick: my career has almost entirely comprised errors and mistakes.

What was your best career move?

Switching from bench research (which is often called “basic science” and which I still fully respect despite its stunning irreproducibility) to evidence based medicine and research methods (the genuine basic science).

Who is the person you would most like to thank and why?

My students, for revealing continuously with their comments how little I know.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

To my co-investigators and coauthors who have long tolerated me, as I'm sure that I drive them crazy with my ideas and suggestions. (“Why don't we analyse the data from another three million papers?”)

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

I'm still having difficulties defining my exact scientific field, as it changes daily. Once we fix this, perhaps I can answer this question, but sadly by then the field will no longer be interesting.

Where are or were you happiest?

In a tiny cottage on a tiny Ionian island called Antipaxi. Along with my wife and my daughter I've been going there every summer for the past 16 years.

If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?

Only £1m? I'd need at least £3m to buy a modest two bedroom house in Palo Alto and stop renting.

Do you support doctor assisted suicide?

No, but I don't blame those who adopt it.

What book should every doctor read?

I can't single out one book in particular as being “the doctor's Bible” or “the doctor's Quran,” but books are my best companion and a great refuge. I typically read a couple of dozen books in parallel, and I love being surrounded by hundreds and thousands of books.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

There is no guilt in pleasure.

If you could be invisible for a day what would you do?

Business as usual: I'm already totally uninhibited in what I do.

What television programmes do you like?

We don't have a television at home, but I occasionally watch some satirical political Greek TV shows online. I enjoy cynical self deprecation and uncensored criticism.

What is your most treasured possession?

A Renaissance edition of Pindar [ancient Greek lyric poet].

What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?

I don't drive a car, so I walk almost everywhere I go (well, my wife occasionally gives me a ride when I'm late).

What personal ambition do you still have?

To become myself.

Summarise your personality in three words

Uncompromising gentle maniac.

Where does alcohol fit into your life?

It doesn't really fit—with few exceptions.

What is your pet hate?

Petty politicians and people who seek power in general. Yet, I thank them for demonstrating their incompetence so often and so vividly: it makes me laugh.

What would be on the menu for your last supper?

Fresh figs, picked by hand from a fig tree, which means that I must die in high summer in Greece. Mephistopheles, do we have a deal?

Do you have any regrets about becoming a scientist and academic?

I'm not sure about what I have become or what I will become. I'm still working on it.

If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?

I'd still be trying to be an astronaut, Zorro, or a scientist. Chances are practically zero for the astronaut (space travel is too expensive) and for Zorro (I love épée fencing, but I lose most bouts). I still haven't given up on the scientist, but, if it means being knowledgeable, the chances are slim, and I will likely remain a poor, questioning researcher.

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