

Distinguishing experts

There are as many opinions as there are experts.

Franklin D Roosevelt

Experienced artifexologists know how to distinguish experts. Experts are classified into four main plumage types: bow ties, regular ties, cowboy bootlace ties, and no ties. Bow ties almost always wear glasses, which they frequently take off and use as an affectation for intelligence. An irony of bow ties is experts' belief that they are being original by wearing a bow tie. Regular ties are more varied and include embarrassing ties (normally hidden under waistcoats and flashed at inopportune moments), wildly colourful ties, and boring, conservative ties. Cowboy bootlace ties are rare, normally found only on the east coast of the United States. No ties are found in most regions, but are not as common as bow ties and regular ties.

Within each of the main visual categories, experts can be divided into three subgroups: deeply tanned feathers, slightly tanned feathers, and untanned feathers. These categories closely reflect the pecking order, with deeply tanned experts at the top. An unusual feature of deeply tanned experts is the failure of their tans to fade in the winter months—the tans are in fact sometimes deeper owing to frequent migrations to "continuing medical education" events in tropical settings.

The pecking order can be complex. A component measure of status has been developed on the basis of the number of publications listed in the experts curriculum vitae plus the average distance they travel to give talks plus the cost of tuition at the schools they attended plus the numbers of honorary degrees and PhD students they have plus the total US\$ value of their current grant support. Like most component measures, this measure has not been validated.

After experts have been slotted into these main categories, several factors can be used to aid identification:

- Size of the curriculum vitae
- Shape of the belly
- Behaviour
- Flight (first class or economy)
- Vocalisations (screeching, twittering, warbling or early morning calls).

Endangered experts need your help!

The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge.

Stephen Hawking

Despite everything we have written, it is important to realise that experts are an endangered species that deserves protection, so that future generations can experience their presence and prescience. This guide, as with other field guides, is not written for experts or the many critics of experts. It is written and dedicated to the many artifexophiles (lovers of experts) worldwide, including clinicians, policy makers, journalists, and the general public. Although it brings us great joy to occasionally abuse experts, PLEASE DO NOT MISUSE THEM! Doing so can be dangerous for everyone.

We dedicate this guide to Richard Smith, a veteran spotter of experts and an inspiration.

Summary points

Experts abound worldwide

They are poorly understood

They generate gobs of guano

If the world should blow itself up, the last audible voice would be that of an expert saying it can't be done.

Peter Ustinov

Contributors: ADO, IC, and AL conceived the guide over several pints of beer, plagiarised most of it from field guides to other birds, and made up the rest. David Sackett contributed to the fun and drank his share of beer, but rendered himself ineligible for coauthorship by confessing that he was an expert in tree felling and chainsaw safety. None of us are willing to be guarantors. Martin Eccles was duped into painting several pictures for the guide, but the *BMJ* was too cheap to publish more than one of them, preferring to obtain additional material from another expert illustrator (Malcolm Willett).

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Competing interests: As mere wannabe experts, we are jealous that we are not enjoying the prestige and lifestyles of real experts.

Ethical approval: Denied by an expert committee.

A sign of the times



Seen on the door of a newly refurbished ward at a London hospital.

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