... despite all the fine words, the final outcome must rely on us, as only we as a society have the ability to finally decide how much spin we are going to allow.

Spin

'Would you be interested in featuring the results of our ground-breaking study in your magazine?' If I had £1 for every time someone has asked me that over the telephone I would now be able to retire to anywhere in the world. The request usually comes from a PR company who seem to have virtually no understanding of dentistry and have obviously never looked inside the *BDJ* to see whether their proposal is the kind of article or paper we would publish. Despite this, each time I give the company the benefit of the doubt and ask my usual question.

'When was the study published?' is my first question, and assuming I get an acceptable answer I would then enquire as to which peer-reviewed journal the study was published in. However I never get to the second question because the answer has always been 'Oh, it hasn't been published yet...' At that stage I point out that the *BDJ* only publishes news stories about 'ground-breaking' studies after they have been peer-reviewed and usually after they have been published (or at least checked by one of our advisers). No doubt the PR company moves on down their list of publications and no doubt they find other places to publish their findings.

I am not blaming PR companies – that is their job. I do sometimes wonder, though, at the current obsession with promoting the 'right' message at the expense of scientific integrity (perhaps I should leave it as simply 'integrity' these days as we see so much spin now in the media it is becoming a little difficult to discover what is true and what is not). As I write this the government is frenetically trying to convince us all that the increased number of better A-level results has nothing to do with lowering educational standards while at the same time assuring us that deregulating pharmacies so that large supermarkets can offer pharmacy outlets will not adversely affect the individual high street pharmacies in the slightest. The phrase 'Get real' comes to mind.

Spin, it would seem, has become a way of life. I suspect it has always been there, but we have become much more aware of it over the last few years (possibly because we have been subjected to much more of it lately). In simple terms spin means people only tell us the bits they want us to hear, not the bits they don't. I used to

think that spin did not mean they are telling us untruths, they just simply don't tell us the whole story – just the bits that support their point of view. That is what I used to think. Now I am not so sure.

However, if the so-called 'ground-breaking' research carried out by independent PR companies and manufacturers carries a degree of spin – what about the research that is published in peer-reviewed journals? Can it also be trusted? How much can practitioners rely on? Sadly, it would appear from the paper published in this issue on *The advantages and disadvantages of running a clinical trial in general practice*, perhaps not as much as we would like to think.

The paper in this issue (page 311–313) describes the difficulties that some researchers had running a clinical trial to assess the relative wear rate of amalgam and a metal-reinforced glass ionomer cement in similar sites in the mouth. The researchers found that one of their main problems was the fact that the practitioners involved did not adhere to the study protocols, thus invalidating the scientific integrity of the findings. The dentists possibly did so for valid clinical reasons, but that is not the point. If this kind of bias occurs in a study that is being run for sound scientific reasons then perhaps we should be aware that studies carried out without any form of peer review or any attempt at publication involving peer review may well have questionable findings (and this is before the PR people start to put on their spin).

What is even more worrying (and I had an example of this as we were going to press) is that some of the stories we are sent by PR companies are basically not true at all. It seems that the old adage 'Never let the facts get in the way of a good story' happens all the time, and as editor I see it over and over again. The cynical might say that it is all a game and anything goes in the world of PR and promotion, but, despite all the fine words, the final outcome must rely on us. Only we as a society have the ability to finally decide how much spin we are going to allow.

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doi: 10.1038/sj.bdj.4811640