

'Nullius in verba'

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'Nullius in verba' is the motto of The Royal Society, which this year celebrates its 350th anniversary (<http://350.royalsociety.org/>). The Royal Society was born out of discussions at Gresham College that followed a lecture by Christopher Wren in November 1660. The society formed following those discussions was granted Royal status two years later by Charles II.

The Royal Society's motto 'Nullius in verba', which can be roughly translated as 'Take nobody's word for it', dates back to 1663. The motto was seen as an expression of the Fellows' determination to withstand the domination of authority and verify all statements by an appeal to facts determined by experiment. There are parallels here in the emergence of the evidence-based approach to healthcare where treatment decisions are made on the best available evidence produced by robust scientific methods.

While the term evidence-based medicine emerged in the 1990s, the search for the best treatment is far older. For those of you with an interest in the development of fair tests of treatments in health care the James Lind Library (www.jameslindlibrary.org) is an excellent resource. It includes references to a wealth of material stretching back more than a millennium, including key passages and images from manuscripts. You can also download the book *'Testing treatments: better*

research for better healthcare' (www.jameslindlibrary.org/testing-treatments.html) in a range of languages. In addition to these resources there are numerous commentaries, essays, bibliographies, theses and other relevant material about the history of fair trials, so it is well worth a good browse.

While developing fair tests of treatment may be one challenge, how well and fairly these are reported is another. As we have often covered in the pages of this journal there are many resources available for critically appraising articles. (www.cebd.org/practising-ebd/appraise/resources-for-appraising/). However, these alone might not be sufficient if the practice of ghostwriting, as highlighted in Ben Goldacre's recent article in the Guardian, (available at www.badscience.net/2010/09/ghostwriters/) is widespread. The article is an update following the recent publication of a paper by Fugh-Berman.¹ In the article Fugh-Berman presents an academic appraisal of the papers revealed following the 2009 decision of the US federal court against Wyeth, This highlighted how specific marketing messages were strategically published in the medical literature after being written by unattributed writers for academics. More information about this ghostwriting scandal can be seen on the PLoS Medicine website (www.plosmedicine.org/

static/ghostwriting.action). Goldacre notes that Universities are inconsistent on ghostwriting and it tends to be hidden from public scrutiny.

This is just one more element that readers of the academic literature need to be cognisant of, and from my perspective increases the importance of the skills of critical appraisal and the value of high quality systematic reviews such as those produced by the Cochrane Collaboration. One question that I am asked regularly is whether systematic reviews that do not give definitive answers are of any value. I always answer 'yes' as I feel that we are better off knowing that we don't have all the answers than blithely following a path we are convinced is correct in the absence of robust evidence. Francis Bacon (1561 - 1626), the man whose ideas the natural philosophers who formed the Royal Society began meeting in 1640 to discuss, said it best;

'If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts he shall end in certainties'.

1. Fugh-Berman AJ. The Haunting of Medical Journals: How Ghostwriting Sold "HRT". *PLoS Med.* 2010 Sep 7; 7(9). pii: e1000335.

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