

Nature 's X-files

□ Not all the correspondence to a top science journal contains top science. Some of it is very odd indeed.

Jim Giles

Some institutions attract outlandish claims. Curators at London's Science Museum are used to meeting visitors clutching perpetual-motion machines — claims often undermined by the batteries attached to the device.

And one staff member told me she was phoned by a visitor from the future. The conversation was cut short because the caller's time machine was departing.

Science journals attract some similarly odd stuff. I keep a small collection in my desk. One writer refers to a 'G'-shaped pattern in his fingerprint.

G, he points out — it usually seems to be 'he' — is the seventh letter of the alphabet. There are seven seas on Earth and seven seals in the Bible, and there is a chain of shops called 7-Eleven. Which proves... well, I'm not sure what, but he seems to think he's onto something.

Fake fax

But not all such letters go straight in the nonsense file. The strange fax that arrived on my desk last month, for example, drew my full attention for a while, and turned out to be part of a more serious and sad story.

The fax looks like a copy of a letter from Nature telling a scientist that their paper has been accepted for publication. But several things were odd. The letterhead looked like a forgery. The sender's name was mis-spelled. And the editor named does not work at the office from which it was supposed to have been sent.

The letter came to Nature 's attention when a company called to check on the publication date. But Nature had no record of the paper. Our manuscript editors did not recognize its title. The correspondence and enquiries desk passed it down to the newsdesk to see if we could make any sense of it.

After a little digging, I discovered that the letter had been forged by a scientist who had got himself in a hole. Contracted to run tests for health-drink company, the researcher said he had some exciting results: the drink contained a molecule with anti-ageing properties.

But the scientist had got ahead of himself. As pressure mounted to publish his results, he tried to stall his employer by claiming his paper had been accepted at Nature. When the paper never appeared, the company got suspicious and contacted us. By the time I got in contact, the researcher had already confessed.

Weird or wonderful?

The mystery solved, the scientist — who still believes there's an age-retarding molecule in the drink — made amends, and the drinks company brought forward no more complaints to us. So the story seemed to end for the best, although sadly.

Does this sort of thing happen often? I doubt it. We've never seen anything like it before - although I suppose the recipient of a forged acceptance letter might not always chase up the publication. In the end, it was just a curiosity to add to my drawer.

Besides reporters' desks, the Nature office contains one other trove of weirdness: the bizarre and overly hopeful submissions for publication. I've never seen inside this drawer — all academic manuscripts submitted to Nature are treated as confidential, and journalists are not given access. But I've heard talk of a paper describing a machine for talking to cats...

Of all the best-yet-worst ideas to reach Nature, I suspect the gems are in that file.

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What's that you say, Tiddles?

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