Editorial

An odyssey of figures or the importance of proofs

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In an Editorial [1] I quoted the writer Julian Barnes, who described his experience with the ‘fact checking department’ of The New Yorker. If the fact checkers, despite enormous efforts, are unable to confirm an authors’ statement (for example whether or not there was indeed a Landseer hanging in Buckingham Palace on the day the Royal Mint Advisory Committee had a meeting there) one achieves the pinnacle of New Yorker-ese: on author, meaning that the final responsibility rests with the author. I indicated that in our view science is largely a matter of trust and that all articles published in Cardiovascular Research are ‘on author’. If the covering letter accompanying a submitted manuscript states that “the manuscript, or part of it, neither has been published (except in the form of an abstract or thesis) nor is currently under consideration for publication by any other journal” we believe that.

In 1998 it was brought to our attention that Fig. 1 of an article published by the group of Dr. David L Vesely in Cardiovascular Research [2] was identical to Fig. 2 of a paper published by the same group in Peptides [3] and to Figs. 8, 10 and 11 of the group in Circulation [4]. The data points were superimposable, although the units on the y-axes were sometimes different. More disturbing was that the articles in Peptides and Circulation contained data on normal human subjects, those in Cardiovascular Research data from patients with heart failure. Our editorial team thought that this matter had to be brought to the attention of the authorities of the University of South Florida. The Chairman of the Department of Internal Medicine instituted a ‘Misconduct in Research’ investigation by the University of South Florida Standing Committee on Research Misconduct. In 1999 this committee concluded that “Dr. Vesely did not perpetrate academic misconduct” but also stated that “Dr. Vesely failed to exercise reasonable care in the preparation and management of research materials intended for international publication, including poor judgement in not acknowledging dual publication of data, even though these data were his own”. Since I had indicated that I would accept the conclusions of the Committee, I published a Corrigendum [5] in which the authors expressed their regret in sending the wrong Fig. 5.

The story is not over yet. Recently, 3 years after the first Corrigendum was published, I received the request to publish another. This time, again papers published in Cardiovascular Research, Circulation and Peptides [3,4,6] are involved, but the Cardiovascular Research paper is different [6]. As you can see in the Corrigendum, the data in the Cardiovascular Research paper are supposed to be from rats with congestive heart failure, those in the Circulation and Peptides papers are from plasma and urine of healthy humans (incidentally, before I have to publish another Corrigendum, the page numbers of the Circulation paper in the Corrigendum are wrong). In the accompanying letter Dr. Vesely wrote: “When proofing these figures before submission to Cardiovascular Research, we did not notice that these were the same figures of healthy human plasma that was published previously. The reason for this mistake is that we were concentrating on where the peaks eluted—which is what is important in these graphs”.

I would say that it is important to take your proofs seriously.

References
