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Of Fake Scholarship and Academic Integrity

My 92-year-old friend Martin Marty, a now-retired University of Chicago Divinity School professor, is best known for his scholarship on American religion. When my son took a religion course at the University of Colorado, the textbook was written by Marty, so I arranged a dinner with the college student and the professor. Conversing with Marty is memorable because he vibrates with intellectual ideas, tells great stories, and backs it up by referencing primary sources (yes, even in conversation). He's also legendary for fake scholarship.

In 1947, Marty's seminary classmate Robert Howard Clausen, facing a closed library and a deadline, invented a fictitious scholar—Franz Bibfeldt—to footnote his paper. Amused, Marty subsequently published a review of Bibfeldt's *The Relieved Paradox*. Marty was disciplined for his prank; in the aftermath, he enrolled at the University of Chicago, where he finished his degree and then taught for 35 years. Over the years, Bibfeldt continued to be quoted (and sometimes published), and the University of Chicago Library now catalogues his works.¹ While the fake Bibfeldt makes for hilarious storytelling, in 2021 it serves as a warning to the scientific community. The COVID pandemic has highlighted the importance of scientific integrity and the public trust.

Last June, a day apart, *The Lancet* and *The New England Journal of Medicine* each retracted a published paper about the use of hydroxychloroquine in treating patients with COVID.^{2,3} When concerns about the veracity of the data arose, the authors initiated an independent peer review—and when the full dataset was not made available, they requested the retractions. The consequences were significant. First, for a short time, hydroxychloroquine was widely touted as an effective treatment for COVID, and some people were even taking it prophylactically, causing a shortage of the drug for those who genuinely needed it. A more serious and longer-lasting issue was the confusion created in the public sphere by the whiplash of changing recommendations.

The pandemic created an intense need for expedited publications, and the retractions from two of our most respected medical journals are a reminder of the value of publishing integrity. (Remember that postpublication peer review led to the retractions, demonstrating that the process can work even

when it has temporarily failed.) What are some of the guardrails that promote publishing integrity in ophthalmology?

First, ours is a scientific community, and we build the ophthalmic knowledge base collectively. And as the hydroxychloroquine papers illustrate, data transparency and the time-honored process of peer review also are essential components.

Of course, peer review is an imperfect and very human practice. For example, peer review can miss methodological flaws in study design, a problem that can be addressed by including a reviewer with expertise in research design.

Selecting reviewers illustrates an underappreciated—and crucial—aspect of publishing excellence: the editors. The job of an editor is monumental. After selecting relevant reviewers with complementary expertise and perspective, the editor must collate and balance the commentary and then make a publishing decision. Ultimately, it is our journal editors who curate the ophthalmic knowledge base. Our profession has an impressive team of chief editors. Along with editorial board members, the editors spend many hours assessing and commenting on each journal article, both accepted and rejected. It's one of the most important jobs in our scientific community and one of the least visible.

Numerous ophthalmology journals published articles relating to the COVID pandemic that were both expedited and scientifically sound. We are fortunate that we can both laugh about Franz Bibfeldt and take pride in the science of ophthalmology.



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1 <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrsc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.BIBFELDT>.

2 Mehra MR et al. *Lancet*. 2020;395(10240):1820.

3 Mehra MR et al. *N Engl J Med*. 2020;382(26):2582.