

The Government's Rush To Judgment On Bernard Fisher's Work, Reputation

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Most readers of *The Scientist* probably are familiar with the case of Bernard Fisher, the University of Pittsburgh professor who had directed the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project (NSABP) for more than two decades. Over that time, the 100 or so papers that resulted have demonstrated the usefulness of basic clinical regimens for treating these diseases and saving patients' lives. They have earned the project and Fisher the respect and acclaim of colleagues internationally, including a Lasker award.

But journalist John Crewdson of the Chicago Tribune reported on an Achilles' heel in NSABP. In this massive, multi-institutional, multi-national multinational, multimillion-dollar study funded by the National Cancer Institute (NCI), Crewdson wrote in 1994, a Canadian member of the project had enrolled some 100 ineligible patients (J. Crewdson, Chicago Tribune, March 13, 1994, page 1). Although a reanalysis concluded that these records did not affect the project's significance or conclusions, Fisher was removed by NCI as the NSABP director.

According to a recent report by Dan Greenberg in *Science and Government Report* (25:1-3, Nov. 1,1995), the government has added insult to injury in the Fisher case. The National Library of Medicine (NLM) has placed "scientific misconduct" tags on the NSABP papers-some of which do not include the

Canadian data-apparently under pressure from NCI. Donald Lindberg, NLM's director, acknowledges this as an extraordinary action, saying he knows of no other case in which "scientific misconduct" labels have been added to any papers in MEDLINE.

Fisher sued the National Institutes of Health and other government agencies in federal court to have the scarlet letters removed from his papers in MEDLINE and other NLM databases. In March, United States District Court for the District of Columbia Judge Ricardo Urbina ruled in Fisher's favor.

One would think it would be an easy task for the huge mainframe computers that store the MEDLINE databases to delete the tags on Fisher's papers as well as correct any other flaws, such as typographical errors. But NLM's databases are dispensed worldwide to vendors, universities, and individuals.

It would be impossible to determine how many thousands of institutions, libraries, and individuals have incorporated these tainted references into their local or personal databases.

One solution is for the *Journal of the National Institute* to publish the 100-plus-item with an explicit correction note the offensive labels and making an apology. When that correction reaches the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) in Philadelphia, it

will be processed and incorporated into the *Science Citation Index (SCI)*. Thus, any diligent scholar, editor, or student using Fisher's references in the future could be alerted to the NLM correction.

I can understand the frustration of any author whose work has been maligned in the scientific press. I recently had a similar experience involving an article in *Scientific American*, which made mistaken allegations about the procedures for selecting journals to be covered in *SCI*. Although the magazine published a "clarification" two months later, it is unlikely that it will be seen or attached to the many thousands of copies of that article circulated around the world. Yet it is at least a small consolation that the correction will be linked to that article's citation record in the *SCI*.

In these and similar cases, the Internet may provide some relief in the future. Through the use of hypertext links, it will be much easier-even automatic-to tie the original paper to any corrections, retractions, or other errata. Some nostalgic readers may recall the old days when journals published errata as separate pieces of paper that diligent librarians literally pasted at the end of

the appropriate articles.

All of this gives me a sense of *deja vu*. In the opening of my 1955 *Science* paper proposing the creation of citation indexes ("Citation indexes for science-a new dimension in documentation through association of ideas," 122[3159]:108-11), I stated: "In this paper I propose a bibliographic system for science literature that can eliminate the uncritical citation of fraudulent, incomplete, or obsolete data by making it possible for the conscientious scholar to be aware of criticisms of earlier papers. . . . Even if there were no other use for a citation index than that of minimizing the citation of poor data, the index would be well worth the effort required to compile it."

This remains one of the most valuable reasons for having and using a citation index. It will prove to be especially useful in the unique case of Fisher and his many colleagues-not just to identify a necessary correction regarding the Canadian data, but also to call out the government's shameful rush to judgment that maligned a major study and insulted a renowned and dedicated researcher.