

Medical journals are immoral, a former BMJ editor tells Sarah Boseley

A question of ethics

Richard Smith thinks that the way medical journals make their money, by publishing scientific papers, is immoral. He also says they are little more than a marketing tool of the drug companies. That's harsh talk from anybody -- but even more remarkable from Smith, who was editor of the British Medical Journal for 25 years until his departure last summer.

Smith is writing a book about publication ethics. He started compiling a list of incidents where the publication of a paper in a medical journal had raised ethical questions, as with the alleged link of MMR, the measles, mumps and rubella vaccination, to autism and the flawed study in 1990 which suggested that women who attended the Bristol cancer help centre were just as likely to die as those who did not.

"It was as I began to think about these things that this started to bother me," says Smith. "I'd always known medical journalism wasn't about the truth, and I tried to write that at least once a year. It's partly because of the nature of science -- it's about provisional truths."

But another thought, he says, "was that this whole business of sending original research to doctors is kind of crazy. When you talk to ordinary doctors, they are not scientists, and yet here we are sending them this mass of complicated information that most of them are not equipped to critically appraise. They haven't got the time."

And then there is the question of the validity of the research being published. The BMJ is one of the four best-respected general medical journals in the world, with the Lancet, the New England Journal of Medicine and the Journal of the American Medical Association. They send out scientific papers for peer review by academics in the same field as the authors. This process gives the paper a sort of validation or stamp of authority in the medical world. But Smith and other journal editors have become disenchanted with it.

"Peer review is a very flawed practice," he says. "It is slow and expensive, a lottery, and prone to abuse and bias. Much of the time it doesn't pick up errors."

Before the internet came along, scientific papers had to be published in journals. But now, he believes, journals should give up what are in effect immoral earnings. Instead, he says, all research should be published in one large free database, with access for all. Smith has joined the board of directors of the free access online Public Library of Science.

The biggest problem with this scenario is financial. Journals make more money from reprints of scientific papers than they do from advertising. Pharmaceutical companies strive to get their drug trials in the best-known journals, because the cachet helps sales. It is a huge earner, and the journals have become reliant on the money. Some journals would go bust, but Smith does not think they would be mourned.

So is there any need at all for a journal like the BMJ, where Smith has spent most of his career? "I didn't think, 'Oh my God, I've wasted my life.' When I think what medical journals do and what they are useful for, I think it is the same as newspapers. They are good at setting agendas. They can say: 'Here is an issue we think is very important and we would like to find a way to change what happens in the real world'."

Smith has taken the arguably more pragmatic road to changing the world now, vacating

the BMJ editor's chair for the post of chief executive of United Health Europe, which aims to help the UK's National Health Service find more effective ways to deliver healthcare. But he insists that although he loved editing the journal, he does not regret leaving or want to go back. After a quarter of a century, it was time for a change.