

EDITORIAL

Competition encourages exaggerated claims

Science like most other professional activities is competitive. The days of the purely curiosity driven amateur scientist is long past. While healthy competition is a spur to achievement, the adverse effects of the current intensely competitive environment on scientists' work and behaviour is increasingly drawing the attention of commentators on the sociological aspects of science.

Scientists compete for many things during their careers including tangibles such as research funding and faculty positions, as well as intangibles such as influence and prestige. When competition assumes an overriding influence on a scientist's actions, ethics seems to lose its importance. It is recognized that competition among scientists have in certain instances resulted in questionable research practices as evidenced by the increasing rate of retractions of published research taking place today.

The incorporation of business management concepts in the management of academic and

research activities, have also resulted in increasing the competition amongst scientists. Many senior scientists today are compelled to spend a larger proportion of their time on writing grant proposals and endless reports for funding agencies of their existing grants, than on actual science. Those managing the award of research funds favour research output with palpable economic outcomes over creation of knowledge, thus stifling the emotional drive which lead most people to take up science as a career.

One of the insidious effects of competition and the emphasis on so called 'relevant science' is the exaggerated claims made for the importance of the results of a study. Authors are tending to shift from the established practice of reporting a significant finding which is supported by several different lines of evidence, consolidated by adequate control experiments, towards making a multitude of exaggerated claims based on a limited set of observations. Only humility and fidelity to truth, can prevent such excesses.

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