The melancholy case of Dr. Cyril Burt

- Founder - editor of *British Journal of Statistical Psychology*.
- Altered papers by others, inserting favourable references to his own papers.
- Attacked a colleague through a letter under a pseudonym.
The melancholy case of Dr. Cyril Burt

- Burt’s massive fund of data (including studies of 53 sets of monozygotic twins) was said to be pure fantasy.

- The falsity of his data remains under discussion.
… and that of Dr. Hans Eysenck

A pupil of Cyril Burt, he founded and edited *Behaviour Research and Therapy* and *Personality and Individual Preferences*.

He published, in his journals, work suggesting that personality was the main determinant for the development of cancer or vascular disease in a person.

This work has never been replicated.
Dr. Richard Smith’s query

Should editors publish original work in journals edited by themselves?
Is political expediency justified?

The case of George Lundberg, editor-in-chief of *JAMA*.

• 15 January 1999:
  Dr E Ratcliffe Anderson Jr, Executive vice president, AMA, fired Dr George Lundberg.
Lundberg’s dismissal

- Anderson cited the publication of a research paper on the sexual attitudes of college students as an important factor in the firing.

- The paper was fast-tracked for publication by Lundberg to coincide with the Clinton impeachment hearings.

- The paper reported that roughly 60% of respondents did not consider engaging in oral sex as ‘having sex’.
Some complaints against Indian editors

- avoidable delays (most of the time)
- rudeness (often)
- misbehaviour (occasionally)
- getting paper rejected outright through a pliable referee
- manipulation of priority while handling similar papers from competing groups
- poor quality and indifferent peer review
- riding roughshod over complaints of authors

Satyanarayana K. The role of the ombudsman in biomedical journals. *J Postgrad Med* 2002;48:292-6
Some complaints against Indian editors (2)

- There is no appellate body outside the editorial office.
- Few authors willingly take on editors (usually powerful and influential people)
- Fear that the editor will become vindictive.
- Whistle-blowers discouraged by the dishonesty of most editors.

Satyanarayana K. The role of the ombudsman in biomedical journals. *J Postgrad Med* 2002;48:292-6
‘Literary lynching’

• Censorship is to art as lynching is to justice.
  Henry Louis Gates, Chair, African American Studies, Harvard University

• Literary lynching often begins with a furiously irresponsible attack by a reviewer.
  Pat Holt in *Literary Lynching*

• Blacklisting an author, department or institution on the basis of prejudice.
Unequal battle: 

contributor versus editor

Editors are well defended by their position, by their editorial boards, and publishers.

An author who has been treated badly stands alone

Cartoon by Hagen
How authors view the editor

“Oh, I’ve got nothing against him personally - it’s just what he represents.”

(Cartoon by Leo Garel)
Editors - their duties

- Editors are the stewards of journals.

- Editors must provide direction for the journal and build a strong management team.

- They must consider and balance the interests of many constituents, including readers, authors, staff, owners, editorial board members, advertisers and the media.
Editors - their duties (2)

- Editors’ decisions to accept or reject a paper for publication should be based only on the paper’s importance, originality, and clarity, and the study’s relevance to the journal.

- Studies that challenge previous work published in the journal should be given an especially sympathetic hearing.

- Studies reporting negative results should not be excluded.
Editors - their duties (3)

• All original studies should be peer reviewed before publication, taking into full account possible bias due to related or conflicting interests.

• Editors must treat all submitted papers as confidential.

• When a published paper is subsequently found to contain major flaws, editors must accept responsibility for correcting the record prominently and promptly.
Editors and advertising

• Editorial decisions must not be influenced by advertising revenue or reprint potential.

• Editorial policy and advertising must be clearly separated.

• Advertisements that mislead must be refused. Editors must be willing to publish criticisms of ads using the same criteria as for material in the rest of the journal.
Declarations by the editor to be made in print

- internal policy of the editorial board
- financial conflicts of interest of editors, editorial board, and other editorial advisors
- any interest in each paper dealt with

Editors are not permitted to have interests.
Suggestions from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, London

• Editors should be selected after open competition and on merit.

• Editors should be professionals with no other major commitment.

• The minutes of all editorial meetings must be maintained and open to review.
Other suggestions for improvement

• Peer review panels must consist of recognised scholars, not pals of the editor wielding rubber stamps.

• A scientific oversight committee must assure that nothing detracts from the journal's higher responsibility to the public: to search for and publish scientific truth.
Be especially gentle with the first-time author

"Be gentle with me, Marvin...it's my first time."
Committee on publication ethics (COPE) founded in 1997

Principles:

• Intellectual honesty should be actively encouraged

• Originality must never be stifled.

• ‘Disclosure is a panacea for most editorial ills.’
  
  John Bailar, professor of statistics at the University of Chicago and statistical adviser to the New England Journal of Medicine

Misconduct

- Intention to mislead and deceive

- Editors must take all allegations and suspicions of misconduct seriously.

- They must recognise that they do not usually have either the legal legitimacy or the means to conduct investigations into serious cases.
Misconduct (2)

- Responding to accusations
- Collection of evidence
- Publishing the results of investigations
- Ensuring transparency
- Publishing retraction
Misconduct: ombudsman

• A person who investigates complaints and mediates fair settlements, especially between aggrieved parties such as consumers and an institution or organization.

• A government official, especially in Scandinavian countries, who investigates citizens' complaints against the government or its functionaries.

From Old Norse *umbodhsmadhr*: deputy, plenipotentiary; *umbodh*, commission
Misconduct: ombudsman

Duties of ombudsman

• Investigate complaints about editors and the editorial process from authors, readers, reviewers and any other concerned person.

• Serve as the journal’s ethicist and ensure that the highest standards are maintained.
Editors must learn when to leave gracefully.

Let's face it George: we're not spring chickens anymore...
Will the editor remain relevant?

• The paper should be posted on the Internet, with access to the full text of all the references.
• Reviewers can check for plagiarism and ensure the validity of premise of the research.
• Publish not only the full data set of a study but also the software that has been used to manipulate the data.