

## **Anecdotes serve a useful purpose**

by Dr. Norbert Gleicher

*This article is provided in reply to D. Brad Wright's response to Dr. Gleicher's **The Wall Street Journal** op-ed, "Expert Panels Won't Improve Health Care."*

Too bad that D. Brad Wright simply didn't get the core arguments made in my OpEd piece in *The Wall Street Journal*, because I actually argued in favor of young academic Turks, like him ( a total of 2 citations on *PubMed*), and against older academic farts, like me (298 *PubMed* citations so far).

So let me explain one more time: Science in every field is disproportionately influenced by the establishment. This happens not only in medicine. Maybe Mr. Wright should read recent articles by Paul Krugman in *The New York Times*, where he laments the disproportionate influence of famous finance professors and fellow Nobel prize winners on academic thought in that field of academia.

It is, however, exactly these leaders, though, who end up populating "expert panels." (And on a side note to Mr. Wright, a panel appointed by government is a "government panel," even if the appointees are not government employees.) Their interest is to protect current knowledge because that knowledge usually brought them to their position of prominence.

In science we, however know (or should know) how fleeting truth is. When we still used textbooks the saying was that by the time a text was printed, half of its content was already out of date. Scientific obliviousness, nowadays, is even more speedy.

My argument against expert panels lies in the fact that such panels uniformly are populated by representatives of the status quo. We older and more established people are inherently resistant to new ideas and, indeed, the more radical (and, therefore, potentially promising) ideas will be, the more will we resist them. This is simply the nature of the world, and even Mr. Wright will have to agree with this fact.

What has transferred U.S. medicine into the world's leader is that our medical system is significantly less autocratic than systems elsewhere. Young people can succeed without, and at times against the will of, their superiors. All they need are smarts and good ideas (no worry, no personal anecdote to follow!).

I, indeed, spiced up my OpEd piece with a personal anecdote about my mother. Wright, however, very obviously misrepresents the purpose. Aside from the fact that a nice Jewish boy always thinks about his mother, the purpose, in good journalistic tradition, was to show how herd-like behavior, led by so-called "experts" (me included), for decades, incorrectly, advised postmenopausal women to take hormone replacement therapy. Various studies of the Women's Health Initiative have since proved this dogma

wrong. My mother, against her son's advice, was spared the consequences by her private gynecologist who, in her case very purposefully, had not followed standard of care.

Nobody recommends the practice of medicine based on anecdotal evidence. Such thought is simply silly. But to believe that the scientific truth of the moment is absolute is equally silly. Mr. Wright better learn this lesson before he graduates and becomes an "opinion leader" in health policy and management.