

Stealing into print

Since this note is about plagiarism, I will have to be extra careful. Marcel C LaFollette published *Stealing into Print* in 1992, and plagiarism was part of her subject matter. In June, 1993, she spoke at an Office of Research Integrity/American Association for the Advancement of Science conference of historians, scientists, editors, lawyers, and others. The proceedings have just become available.

Fraud, fabrication, and plagiarism are the great "thou shalt nots" of the academic world. The last one is hardest to define. It is often pardoned as inadvertent (no intent to deceive); the American Historical

Association blocked that escape route in 1986. Nor has plagiarism always been taken seriously. If the composer Salieri did murder Mozart, it was not because the young prodigy pinched the old man's tunes. Copying of that kind was even seen as a compliment. LaFollette quotes two ancient witticisms—"What is mine is mine, and what is yours belongs to both of us" and "A pox on those who got in first with our lines"—and invites us to focus on theft in thought, word, and deed. Words and deeds may be picked up as other forms of fraud (eg, publishing stolen data is more than mere plagiarism) but stolen thoughts are altogether more difficult.

These proceedings, graced with several detailed accounts of how real allegations of plagiarism were tackled, return time and again to the virtual impossibility of proving that an idea has been stolen. Free exchange of ideas is the stuff of research, and that demands informality. Free exchange and vigorous was the stuff of this conference.

ORI/AAAS Conference on Plagiarism and Theft of Ideas. Edited by Alan R Price. Available on diskette, in WordPerfect 5.1 or ASCII format, from Dr Price, Division of Research Investigations, Office of Research Integrity, 5515 Security Lane, Suite 700, Rockville, MD 20852, USA.

David Sharp

Effects of environmental platinum need study

Platinum concentrations in road dusts and in soil do increase with traffic density, but there is no evidence yet that platinum emitted from vehicle catalytic converters adversely affects health, concludes a report for the UK Department of the Environment. However, the platinum emitted can reach the food chain for man, and dietary platinum has been reported to be bioavailable. Hence the long-term effects of raised platinum concentrations in the environment require further research, adds the report (*Platinum Group Metals in the Environment: Their Use in Vehicle Exhaust Catalysts and Implications for Human Health in the UK*), prepared by the Imperial College Centre for Environmental Technology, London.

The health effects of platinum salts and compounds—cytotoxicity, allergic reactions, and mutagenicity and carcinogenicity—depend on species of the platinum group element. In addition, unlike some complexes with the platinum group elements, the metallic forms are not thought to be toxic to man. Skin-prick tests with particulate exhaust samples on individuals sensitive to platinum did not elicit reactions at concentrations likely to do so.

The report emphasises that the introduction of catalytic converters in some countries has reduced the amounts or toxic emissions into the air from cars. It also points out that, in the UK, the amount of platinum released into the environment as a result of cancer chemotherapy is probably the largest source of environmental platinum. In this case, the metal is likely to end up in sewage sludge, and one of the suggestions for further study is the disposal and fate of platinum-containing drugs. Another is the exposure to platinum from drinking water and the diet.

Vivien Choo

Sentence at Department of Corrections

We have received the following perplexing letter.

"Sir,—*The Lancet* is to be congratulated on the forthrightly Popperian stand of its new Department of Error (July 22, p 258). Previously all information in the journal had only a provisional truth status, much of it waiting inexorably for the falsification that is the possible fate of all scientific claims. The new section changes all that. Here is a section which we can be certain is definitely true, unlike the baser statements made on other pages.

Departments of Clinical Truth have for many years been arguing, needless to say with impeccable logic, for precisely such progress. Advances have been small and infrequent, although publication of the first book devoted entirely to corrections, addenda, and comments, by Dr Hutchinson and Dr Ke,¹ is an important first step in defining the field. Nevertheless it is clear that real advances will always be hampered whereas corrections have the second class status associated with being published weeks, months, or even years after the original publication. We therefore wish to submit the present letter as the first example of a medical communication published with its own immediate correction (see below).

Art E Fact, M I Stake

Department of Clinical Trials and Applied Veracity,
The Erroneous Institute, Erehwon Boulevard, Fallacia

1 Hutchinson TP, Ke Y. Corrections, addenda, and comments published in journals of statistics and mathematics applied to psychology and education 1970-91: and index. Sydney, NSW: Rumsby Scientific Publishing.

Dr Fact and Dr Stake regret the occurrence of several errors of logic in their letter in the current issue of a journal. In addition, a significance level ($2p=0.6180$) was inadvertently omitted from the second paragraph, and none of the empirical claims was correct. The conclusions should therefore be treated with care."

Despite a careful search through *Lancet* files and *Medline*, we have been unable to track down these diligent authors. Readers' assistance would be much appreciated.

Richard Horton

News in Brief

Australia's coordinated care The health minister has proposed a system of coordinated care for chronically ill patients to streamline the cost and management of long-term care. Under the proposal, health services for patients with illnesses such as diabetes, asthma, stroke, or dementia would be managed by one agent, such as a general practitioner. Large-scale trials of the proposal are planned for next year.

Mexico to broaden contraceptive choice The government has issued a National Population Program aimed at reaching replacement fertility by the year 2005 (total fertility has fallen from 7 in 1960 to about 3 today), and has consulted on widening the available contraceptive choice in the country. A workshop between the Ministries of Health and Social Security, the family planning association, and other agencies strongly supported the decision to make monthly injectable contraceptives available.