LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The image of mass destruction inevitably leads to intellectual mass distraction

KEYWORDS
Crohn’s disease; Paratuberculosis; Mycobacteria; Etiologic agents

We read with bewilderment the article by Van Kruiningen entitled "Where are the weapons of mass destruction — the Mycobacterium paratuberculosis in Crohn's disease?". Although we have the utmost respect for Van Kruiningen's opinions and have followed his works over the years, we must take issue with his viewpoint from a scientific perspective. We recognize that the Viewpoint section is a personal opinion that is often fraught with biased approach, selective references, and distorted data interpretations. However, the peer-review process fails when an article is published that is largely based on unsubstantiated unpublished information (also known as hearsay) presented as fact.

Van Kruiningen's viewpoint is largely based on "results (that have never been reported", "personal communication(s)", "not published", "results that were never published", "unpublished data", "These data were never published", and the like. In addition to the outright acknowledgment of hearsay, data are further presented that are neither referenced nor documented. As one of many examples, Van Kruiningen states that "We inoculated infant pygmy goats with... diseased tissues" and these animals failed to develop disease. There are no citations or references to these facts and important details of these alleged experiments are omitted — that the inoculation methods from previous studies2 were changed resulting in the failure to infect animal using pure bacteria. While the statement that none of the animals developed infection/disease may be true in the technical sense, it is far from the whole story.

There is also evidence that clearly establishes a lack of knowledge of the current literature or a selective disregard thereof. As one of many examples, when discussing the work of Kirkwood et al. in 2009, Van Kruiningen concludes that "Then, for reasons not disclosed, the culture attempts were discontinued". How did Van Kruiningen come to this conclusion? Notwithstanding the fact that 2-years is hardly a reasonable time to conclude that efforts were "discontinued", Kirkwood and colleagues have continued their efforts and have published 2 follow-up articles in 2011.3,4 Where are the references to the various systematic reviews and meta-analyses5,6 or bipartisan reviews?7

Van Kruiningen offers only 2 explanations for the positive data: "by regarding the positives as false positives, or by suggesting sample contamination". Does he not consider the possibility that the data could be real? Is he suggesting experienced laboratories should never be used because of the remote possibility of contamination? Perhaps all our scientific data generated in experienced laboratories should be discounted.

The Viewpoint by Van Kruiningen can best be judged by the expression of Donald Barron who said "There is no such thing as a bad experiment, only bad interpretation of the results". The recent bipartisan review7 should be consulted for the facts.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts to declare.

References


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