Overly honest M&M sections

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In these troubled times of scientific fraud and publishing misconduct one could easily forget that the majority of us are honest scientists and clinicians trying to advance knowledge in the field of reproductive medicine and biology. We submit grant proposals, perform sample size calculations, register trials at clinicaltrials.gov, supervise PhD students, and write and correct manuscripts that reflect our research as accurately and honestly as possible. Data dredging and outcome massage are not done and scatter plots always include all data points obtained, even the outliers. Science can only continue to command respect by honestly reporting original research, consisting of experiments that have been appropriately designed, with conclusions that are supported by the findings. Only by transparency and by providing all details will research advance investigating and treating disease.

Or will it? Can we be too transparent in reporting research? A torrent of tweets has taken over Twitter recently under the hashtag #overly-honestmethods. Here are some things that according to the tweeting scientists probably you should not include in the M&M section of your next paper: ‘Blood samples were spun at 1500 rpm because the centrifuge made scary noises at higher speeds’; ‘The enzyme digest was performed overnight as I was not going to hang around for another 5 hours at 7 pm’; and ‘We didn’t read half of the papers we cite because they are behind a paywall’. ‘The data is old because in between writing the first draft and doing the revisions I had a baby’. Or: ‘We don’t know how all the results were obtained; the postdoc who did all the work has since left to start a bakery’; ‘We tried several statistical confidence test, randomly, here is the one that gives the coolest results’; ‘We used Uniprot for Fig. 1 and Ensembl for Fig. 2 because they were done by different PhD students 2 years apart’.

Not unsurprisingly, not all experiments proceed according to the sophisticated study design that had been so meticulously developed: ‘The wrong reagent was used for experiments 1 and 2 because my advisor has an Australian accent and I misunderstood’. And finally one that we suspect is hovering in the background of some of the studies we actually do receive at Human Reproduction: ‘The hypothesis and rationale behind testing these compounds in this model system is that we already had them in our fridge’.

A narrow margin exists between painstakingly reporting every infinitesimal detail and not reporting details considered ‘non-essential’. It’s publish (preferably positive results), or perish (probably painfully). As Andrei Sinyavsky wrote in his delightful short story The Graphomaniacs, in 1961, ‘at any hour of the day new folios appear that nobody needs and that no one reads. But the army of the possessed stubbornly continues its work...’