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Short Report

For the People: A Lesson from the SARS-CoV-2 Outbreak

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A lesson from the 2019-nCoV (renamed as SARS-CoV-2) outbreak: your research is for the people, not for your paper. Politics could be more professional and a bit distanced from the independence of the academy.

The recent coronavirus outbreak in China has become a global public health emergency. It is tragic, and partly a result of some of the recent scientific scandals, that the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak has happened in China. Unquestionably, it is a failure of research ethics and the integrity of publication. Many high-ranking officers and expert elites are now trying to shirk responsibility. If top officers become “predatory”, nobody dares speak out. People are confused by the paradox: people in high-ranking and respected positions with distinguished academic backgrounds also seems to refined egoism (refined egoism is characterized by their sophistication, selfishness, myopia and changeability of refined egoists), an intelligent and judicious blend of self-interest and/or selfishness). People are calling for the director of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) China to resign due to non-professional actions or incompetence, otherwise the government should fire him failed in his responsibility. So far, several directors have been fired because they were incompetent for their position in the health-care bureaus of big cities in Hubei Province. Politics can have a place in

administration but should be kept away from the academy itself. To obtain high-rank officer in academy should be appointed away from connections with competing interests. Otherwise, she/he should step down.

However, to be published in journals like The Lancet and NEJM, it was reported that some high-ranking officials tried to take samples, data and resources from other lower-tier labs to prepare for their own papers. This meant that the data might not be timely. As early as January 11, researchers already knew that medical staff had become infected with SARS-CoV-2, so why was information about human-to-human transmission not published immediately? It is possible that some CDC staff might have held back the data, leading to poor infection control. Other reports revealed that some top academicians-led group could have had unexpected sampling technique mistakes. However, the data show at least 15 cases of medical staff infection were irrefutable by the end of January, indicating that there was human to human transmission. However, the CDC’s official line was different. On January 10, it was “no human to human transmission” and on January 14, it was changed to “there may be limited human to human transmission”. However, it is clear that there were seven cases of medical staff infection in Wuhan from January 1 to 11, and eight cases from January 12 to 22.

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This was not the only scandal. While some scientists shared some sequence data on the SARS-CoV-2 virus ahead of their publication, others profited from their benevolence/charity and published their own papers without informing the original researchers/scientists, which is a clear breach of ethics. A few supervisors could have tried to force their graduate students to risk their lives to perform SARS-CoV-2 research in labs with insufficient safety protocols so that the supervisors could produce hot-topic publications, though they could have been interrupted later. If these were not stopped, they could contribute further to the catastrophe.

If the truth had been revealed in time and appropriate actions were taken, hundreds of COVID-19 patients would not have died, and others would have suffered much less. There needs to be widespread condemnation of how some researchers could have been only concerned about publishing their articles rather than focusing on controlling the infection. For example, the medical journals should take top responsibility for reminding the authors that such behavior is unethical, anti-science, anti-society and anti-humanity. Such publications should be marked for retraction. Furthermore, the CDC does not exist to publish papers but control epidemics in the early stages of an outbreak, although they argue that they have not. Most if not all people could believe in the group of national CDC director was busy writing papers during the crucial early stage of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak. Although they themselves disagree on it, their arguments have not convinced others. Compared to human life including the “whistleblower” medical doctor’s, publications are insignificant. More time should be spent on preventing and controlling the virus than on organizing a beautiful paper for publication.

However, the latest anti-CoV research policy from the China Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) has emphasized altruism and the need to avoid focusing on SCI publications and refined egoism. Wiping out China’s SCI scandals is very challenging, but we need to start by restructuring the academic system toward a single functional module. To take an example, unlike the current chancellors in top universities, the founder of one private university (i.e. the Vice-Chancellor of Nankai University one century ago) took care of collecting donations, but he had one-third the salary of an academic professor and worked to serve the professors. The latest NSFC guidelines have started to pay attention to high-quality evaluations for proposals and feedback loop to improve it.

The Swiss model, offering some professors lifelong contracts and academic independence, would allow them to speak the truth fearlessly, even with an independent monitoring system. We need a hallmark system to assess anomalies and award altruism over refined egoism. Such restructuring seems similar to retraining the mind. It is hard to move forward, but we need to try to do something. To cite a traditional saying: “If the monkey wouldn’t climb the tree, we will need to beat the gong several times.”

Lastly, the press should watch out for practices that are anti-science, anti-society and anti-humanity, and should remind the authors to obey the codes of ethics. As an immunologist, I expect that our people will learn lessons from the SARS-CoV-2, similar to how a unique “immunization” solution was found after the 2003 SARS outbreak. However, the SARS-CoV-2 catastrophe may not have occurred without the folly of refined egoism and the overwhelming drive for SCI publication, combined with the CDC’s non-professional administration and the bureaucracy of Wuhan City’s healthcare system. Of course, there are some high-ranking officials in both Hainan and Sichuan provinces, who have a strong medical research background rather than public speaking ability and loyalty alone. In this event, the Chinese government has reacted by applying its strongest executive powers. Unfortunately, this is somewhat late; we would rather have small-scale disease prevention and control at the beginning rather than measures like city-wide quarantines and nation-wide quasi-quarantines. To use a metaphor, I would prefer exercise, massage and traditional Chinese medicine to keep healthy and prevent disease rather than undergo therapy with strong toxic drugs. The current situation looks bad, but it is also a chance to evolve: to restructure it without stagnant residuals so that the Chinese academic system may become an example, using their own comparative advantages, merits and features.

Beyond the abovementioned, the CDC and epidemiologists should take the responsibility for tracing the origin of SARS-CoV-2 rather than let the rumors or guess fly in the air. Should some amateurs do such jobs for the CDC?

~Keep it here and wondering the other day about what we thought about this outbreak.