

## Reviewer's report

**Title:** A Pilot Study on How Homeopathy is Represented in Conventional and CAM Peer Reviewed Journals

**Version:** 1 **Date:** 25 April 2005

**Reviewer:** Matko Marusic

### Reviewer's report:

#### General

Before writing the review of this paper, I want to introduce myself: I am Matko Marusic, professor of physiology and immunology at Zagreb University School of Medicine, Zagreb, Croatia. I am an experienced researcher and teacher (please feel free to check, you know how), which does not spare me of having wrong ideas, conclusions, or views. However, I am a devoted and very responsible teacher and researcher, and have, at least a small, right to claim that I am doing my best to be objective, rational, and apply scientific critical thinking in my analysis and judgement. All in all, I still ended up as being a person who has only negative experience with and negative opinion of alternative and complementary medicine (CAM). To explain why this is so, would take a lot of time and space, so I will reveal my views by offering them, systematically listed, in my recent publication, available as full PDF text, at a fee-free web site:

[http://www.cmj.hr/2004/4506/05\\_MARUSIC.pdf](http://www.cmj.hr/2004/4506/05_MARUSIC.pdf).

Thank you.

Now, the review of Caulfield and DeBow article submitted for publication in BMC Complementary and Alternative Medicine:

1. This is (as authors suggest themselves) a nice, small, preliminary, interesting and relevant article, which, depending on the journals general criteria, can be published, but also may be rejected, because the authors just opened a question but did not invest the due effort to extract answer(s) that could be looked for and - extracted.
2. However, in any case, the article needs a substantial rewriting, especially in its Discussion Section, for the simple and astonishing reason, that it is heavily, unnecessarily, and surprisingly biased.
3. The authors found that more articles (no statistics!) published in conventional scientific journals report negative outcomes for homeopathy than CAM-specialized journals, and conclude (suggest, several times!)

#### UNBELIEVABLE THING

that conventional journals are negatively biased to CAM!!!!

4. This is simply wrong. Anybody with any training in critical analysis of data can see it. I am not sure that I have to bother the reader, the editor, and myself with the explanation. The difference does NOT suggest a bias! If considering ANY bias, the authors should have also suspected positive bias by CAM journals, etc.

5. By the same token: why do the authors consider balanced views those when a negative CAM result (study, evidence) is not qualified as negative but is still given encouraging comment? When a conventional science article is criticized in a conventional science journal, nobody expects such kind of balancing when the paper is rejected or is seriously criticized. For a scientist it is normal to both give and receive a critique that concerns some data, including the subject of possible future success of the avenue of research in question.

So much for the review. Now, a comment (a mean one), and then suggestions, etc., even cooperation!

Comment:

I grew up in communist world, and always felt disadvantaged in comparison to people from the free,

western world with respect to living, learning, and enjoying freedom and democracy. Even today, (now, for 15 years we in Croatia live in freedom and democracy) people like me blame themselves that their (our) minds are still burdened by self-control, censorship of the kind that has been indispensable to survive political terror. When we feel differently, even a bit differently, towards the newest achievements of the western world such as human rights, political correctness, positive discrimination, peace building efforts and so on, we feel guilty because, due to the training in our early lives, we suspect that our minds are not as free as they should be.

Now, reading this article, which I find biased for political correctness, biased against sound scientific reasoning that we teach in thousands of schools, I find myself a free and happy man. Because I do not feel obligation to say that wrong is (maybe) right and refuse to say that something right by all available criteria is biased.

I feel free, even obliged, to express grave doubts about therapy that dilutes the active principle beyond Avogadro's number. Why else did I go to school? Why have I, and my teachers, and society which paid them, invested so much time, effort, intelligence, and money in learning about the laws of chemistry?

How can an educated person, regardless of his or her private, personal desires, hopes, inclinations, religion, or anything else say: the remedies act through biophysical pathways, and all include the idea of some form of information transfer from the diluted substance to the diluting agent???

Biophysics is not a witchcraft, it is a science, with powerful methods, and respectable body of knowledge why is it then NOT used to study this information transfer? With this in mind, I must express my surprise that Drs Caulfield and DeBow are discussing the subject at all.

Democracy, human rights, and political correctness have nothing to do with laws of chemistry!

Otherwise we will find ourselves back in times like my communist youth, when I was forced to study Lisenko and others!

Nobody has the right to forbid the knowledge.

Nobody has the right to expect from learned people NOT to speak against things that are contrary to reason, results of centuries-old, extremely hard work of the best minds of the humankind (scientists), consensus of best experts, and rational reason.

Suggestions:

(Otherwise) I congratulate the authors for pinpointing an excellent model and approaching it in the right manner. Indeed, comparison(s) of articles on CAM in conventional (I believe that this is an unfair word, but due to my limited capacity in English language, I borrowed it from the article which I review) and CAM-specialized journals is a good model to clarify (shed some light) some aspects of the grave question of relationship of SCIENCE (and MEDICINE) and CAM.

There are so many parameters that the authors can (could) assess (compare) in their model:

- a) general quality of the two groups of journals (including impact factor, IF, for example I know you may dislike this, but it is still the best available journal quality indicator provided that it is handled in an objective and learned manner),
- b) quality of their review processes,
- c) quality (see below) of the reviewers,
- d) strength (scientific quality) of the authors of the analyzed (and other) articles, e.g., number and quality of publications in a given period of time, adjusted for partial authorship and journals IF (I know of a good model for this approach, ask if you want it),
- e) quality of authors research institutions, their research grants, etc., as is done for rating medical schools,
- f) quality of the published (analyzed) articles.

Matko Marusic

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

On the editor

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the

author can be trusted to correct)

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.