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## Jokes in scientific journals

# Spiffed Up With SpooF

At long last, a full 34 years after publication of her hoax report in the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*, Elaine Murphy, a distinguished UK medical professor, has admitted she invented 'cello scrotum'. Don't you ever wonder just how many 'jokes' in the scientific literature are still accepted as genuine research observations by the unsuspecting?

In the original 1974 research letter 'Cello Scrotum', signed under her husband's name (*BMJ* 1974; ii, 335), Professor Murphy wrote: "Though I have not come across 'guitar nipple' as reported by Dr. P. Curtis, I did once come across a case of 'cello scrotum' caused by irritation from the body of the cello. The patient in question was a professional musician and played in rehearsal, practice, or concert for several hours each day."

Murphy now claims that her report was just a joke, that she was merely voicing her own doubts as to the truth of the previously reported condition, 'guitar nipple', that had described a one-sided mastitis of the female breast observed in three 8- to 10-year old girls who played their guitars, as it were, too close to their chests.

Three decades after her original letter, Professor Murphy has finally confessed both online and in a printed *BMJ* retraction letter (*BMJ* 2009; 334: b288) – the latter is ironically more than three times the length of the original note! But why confess now? After all these years? Could it be that whilst 'dining out' on this amusing story for 35 years, she has belatedly discovered that her 'cello scrotum' has been cited in research reports as a real scientific observation, no doubt written by less humorously-inclined medical clinicians?

### No harm done

Murphy even admits to being "thrilled once more to be quoted" in 'A Symphony of Maladies', an apparently serious article analysing health risks associated with being a professional musician that appeared in *BMJ* at the end of December 2008. 'Cello scrotum' is listed as one of the possible occupational risks of being a musician although

the authors note that "the awkward playing position required to produce the latter make it a rarity that has been questioned".

Following Murphy's confession, *BMJ* has reacted swiftly by printing a "correction" to the 'Symphony' article (6 February, 2009), noting that cello scrotum is now known to



"Scientists enjoy humour": Members of the *Luxuriant Flowing Hair Club for Scientists*

be a "hoax". But, incredibly, Murphy's 200 word confession has also been the excuse for a worldwide flurry of media reports on the matter! Why so much fuss? Perhaps because, instead of sticking to clinical medicine, Elaine Murphy chose to pursue an administrative medical career which has culminated in her nomination as a member of the UK Parliament – she is now sitting in the (unelected) House of Lords as Baroness Murphy of Aldgate "taking interest in mental health and ageing issues". Nevertheless, a more likely reason for press attention is simply that the term, "cello scrotum", makes for titillating journalism.

A *BMJ* spokesman has insisted that celo scrotum has “added to the gaiety of life” and that there was no harm done. However, some commentators have reacted more severely to this attack on scientific truth, equating Baroness Murphy’s joke to blatant scientific fraud. It seems unlikely that such critics have actually looked at the original entry – just how big an affront to scientific truth can you make in only 62 words?

More to the point, *BMJ* has a history of misunderstood humour. Its Christmas editions are traditionally livened up with spoof articles. Unfortunately, the rest of the world’s press, or more especially, their science and medical journalists, frequently demonstrate both their inability to distinguish scientific fact from fiction and their laziness when it comes to cross-checking the scientific background to their hastily-written reports.

### The press falls for it

For example, consider the case of the unicycling doctor who, from his rather unusual observational platform, compiled a study of the street public’s reaction to his antics. Sam Shuster may have been a retired dermatologist publishing in the Christmas 2007 issue of *BMJ*, and the one and only graph in his study showed him unicycling along a blue testosterone curve, but nevertheless the title of his article, “Sex, aggression, and humour: responses to unicycling” was too much for the world’s press, who reported it as an entirely serious scientific study.

Dr. Shuster claimed to have noted 400 people’s responses to his unicycling. He found that children under 12 displayed similar curiosity but that boys aged 11-13 behaved violently, trying to knock him off his unicycle, and that young men “attempted comedy”, putting him down with jokes, most of which referred to his wheel. But since women and older men were found to be “encouraging, praising, or concerned,” he concluded that “adult male humour is characterized by repetitive, humorous verbal put-downs concealing a latent aggression.” This gave us headlines such as: “Researcher claims men are funnier than women”, “Humour comes from testosterone”, “Humour is a male thing”, “Evolution of humour: testosterone is why men try to be funny”, and “Is humour tied to male aggression?” Yet it is perfectly clear in the original, colourfully illustrated *BMJ* presentation, that Shuster’s unicycling study was never intended to be treated as a serious scientific study – just a bit of festive light reading!

Typically, once the joke set in, news hungry journalists displayed far more reticence when it came to admitting they had been foolish and wrong to report as fact what was clearly an entertaining spoof. In fact, there aren’t any official clarifications or retractions. Instead, the public is left with an entirely false impression that some great new scientific truth has been discovered and that this must be true because it has already been reported by objective professional journalists. As if the world’s press isn’t already littered with careless reporting of incomplete, incompetently-executed scientific research assertions! And these don’t even raise a smile!

Despite the general journalist’s confusion as to what constitutes a joke in science, there are scientists who feel they fulfil an important role. Jan Witkowski, the aptly-named biochemist and long-time contributor to *Trends in Biochemical Sciences*, has written about the occurrence of humour in science journals, praising *BMJ*’s example. In “Nothing to laugh at at all: humour in biochemical journals”, he noted that hard science journals are “remarkably short on humour and deadly dull (DD)”. Witkowski even quantified this tendency using database searches for the occurrence of ‘wit and humour’ in scientific literature. He expressed his data as the ‘Lack of Humour Ratio’ (LHR), his “holder of the world record for LHR” being the Journal of Biological Chemistry “where the ratio of humour-to-serious pages is a staggering 0 to 31,596”! But medical journals performed much better. Here, Witkowski found a much higher incidence of humour and his most humouristic journal was, surprise, surprise, *BMJ*, with an LHR of 21. He suggested that “the humorous articles are themselves a form of therapy for individuals like doctors, nurses and dentists who work under considerable stress.” Indeed, he was puzzled: “if scientists enjoy humour, and the humour in scientific journals is good, clean fun, why is there so little of it?”

### Usually deadly dull

However, as Witkowski noted, his assessment of what passed for ‘wit and humour’ required a certain degree of “self-declaration” – undeclared hoaxes such as Elaine Murphy’s 34 year silence on her scrotum report would have passed undetected in his survey. Perhaps there is more “wit and humour” out there, lurking undiscovered beneath the deadly dull veneer of the world’s formal scientific literature?

JEREMY GARWOOD