

Editor's Page

Medical Research: Its Light and Dark Sides

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Research, and medical research in particular, has always been synonymous with the quest for an understanding of the unknown and the anticipation of new applications that will contribute to an improvement in the quality of life or to its prolongation. The ethics that underlie this have always been a *sine qua non*. These principles and assumptions have inspired research efforts, have spurred decisions by state institutions, and have often motivated benefactors with a vision of seeking out the best in medicine.

Medical research has swelled to giant size. Small research groups have morphed into costly, extensively-staffed laboratories. Electronic publication has expanded the outlets for research goals and findings. However, the zest for easy publication credits can end up leaving indelible stains on an author's reputation.

Laboratory research, and more particularly applied research and associated clinical investigations, have been placed in the service of industry, often with wonderful results. But the financial requirements of the free market are a remorseless voice that must always be heeded.

Lately, among both medical researchers and consumers, we have seen a move towards the practice of evidence-based medicine structured through guidelines. These represent the distillation of the findings of multi-centre studies involving hundreds of dis-

parate institutions, some of which, however, have come to view the multi-centre studies as a gravy train.

So has medical research over the last thirty years been on the right track?

Undoubtedly, research has been more productive than ever before, making astounding contributions to the modern treatment of cardiovascular diseases. At the same time, though, research has acquired a significant aspect as a product of tough commercialisation, with various dimensions.

Obviously a short article like this one cannot provide a detailed description of all sides, positive and negative, of this complex relationship, where ethics and science are jockeying with merciless money markets, a range of medical vested interests, and the fervent hopes of patients who expect the best from medical research.

However, in such analyses it can often happen that the good and the bad become blurred, lose their unequivocal character, and start to be evaluated in terms of broader parameters, other values related to history, large population sizes, and philosophy.

Taking a short-term view of medical research in our times, I believe that important successes must be acknowledged. At the same time, however, this progress conceals non-negligible transgressions, runaway competition and, unfortunately, wider interference whose influence it is still too far early to assess.