

Reporting Provocative Results

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The idea is that provocative/hot results can

- Help society by being the first warnings to a potential danger
- Harm society by letting loose lawyers and other vermin who take preliminary results as fact. The ensuing litigation will harm society in the long run by increasing costs of healthcare or eliminating potentially beneficial drugs
 - o For example: In 1981 a paper in JAMA that suggested **spermicidal use around conception** could lead to birth defects was used to sue the manufacturer, who later considered withdrawing the product.
- Harm Society by creating misleading avenues of research
 - o For example: **Nickel poisoning** was suggested as the cause of **Legionnaires' disease**
- Harm Society by advocating the use of dangerous drugs
 - o For example: **Diethylstilbestrol (DES)** was used to prevent bad pregnancy outcomes, but not enough work was done to realize that women exposed to DES *in utero* ("DES daughters") had an increased risk of developing vaginal cancer.

How to handle this?

- Not report it at all
- Bury the results in journals that are only read by specialists
 - o Can be harmful. For example study of **fetal alcohol syndrome** was buried ☹
Took 5 years for it to be generally known by practitioners
 - o Pubmed makes burial a moot point anyway
- Send it as a letter to editor
 - o Problems
 - Not peer reviewed
 - Not room for data
 - o Benefit
 - o Not taken seriously by reporters and others of low scientific literacy
- Send to a major medical Journal
 - o Editor's responsibility to accept or not
 - o Authors must make clear the tentative nature of the results