

Cover page

Letter to the Editor re: The Bad Medicine of Doctored

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Response to Grill and Rabinovici, JAMA Perspective

The Perspective article by Drs. Grill and Rabinovici discounts the crisis of research integrity in the field of Alzheimer's disease research.¹ While characterizing our efforts as "misinformation and conspiracy theories," the authors wrongly assert that our recent investigation reported in the book "Doctored"² described only four cases of probable or confirmed research-integrity lapses. Working nights and weekends for more than a year with no funding, a small team of forensic image experts uncovered hundreds of problematic – or fraudulent – papers from dozens of Alzheimer's investigators. Those papers, which have been cited in aggregate about 80,000 times, include important examples from the home institution of Dr. Grill that he and his co-author overlook.³ The apparently doctored studies also have been cited in active patents nearly 500 times. Our investigation exposed strong evidence of misconduct by numerous established investigators, including undeniable leaders of the field, and had direct implications for multiple clinical trial programs. These are not "myths," as alleged in a recent statement from the Alzheimer's Association.⁴ How many cases must be found before the field takes this seriously?

It is particularly dispiriting to hear leaders in scientific ethics suggest that open discussion of fraud and research integrity is more of a threat to Alzheimer's research⁵ than the fraud itself. Such complacency and condescension seems misguided in an argument rooted in preserving and improving public trust in the scientific enterprise.

The problem is compounded by the many journals and institutions that refuse to address or delay action on doctored images, often for years. Such inertia defies the soothing dogma that science "self-corrects." Science is not sentient nor its corrective process fast enough to prevent misconduct from skewing thinking in the field, wasting precious funding, and even harming patients. Too often, self-correction depends on scientists who take a stand for integrity. When scientific institutions meant to protect rigor and promote creative thinking are misused to promote a particular viewpoint or favored investigators, they exacerbate the harm from fraudulent data. Persistent efforts to obscure or downplay research integrity revelations, fixation on a narrow disease model and punishment of alternate voices surely have contributed to the lack of therapeutic progress. The field of Alzheimer's disease research is off track. When scientific leaders ignore or dismiss such problems, then whistleblowers and journalists inevitably and properly step into the breach.

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