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When Pariahs Have Good Ideas

By The Editors

Even mentioning the name Peter Duesberg inflames strong feelings, both pro and con. After gaining fame in 1970 as the virologist who first identified a cancer-causing gene, in the 1980s he became the leading scientific torchbearer for the so-called AIDS dissidents who dispute that HIV causes the immunodeficiency disorder. To the dissidents, Duesberg is Galileo, oppressed for proclaiming scientific truth against biomedical dogma. A far larger number of AIDS activists, physicians and researchers, however, think Duesberg has become a crank who refuses to accept abundant proof that he is wrong. To them, he is at best a nuisance and at worst a source of dangerous disinformation on public health.

Readers may therefore be shocked to see Duesberg as an author in this month's issue. He is not here because we have misgivings about the HIV-AIDS link. Rather Duesberg has also developed a novel theory about the origins of cancer, one that supposes a derangement of the chromosomes, rather than of individual genes, is the spark that ignites malignant changes in cells. That concept is still on the fringe of cancer research, but laboratories are investigating it seriously. Thus, as wrong as Duesberg surely is about HIV, there is at least a chance that he is significantly right about cancer. We consider the case worthy of bringing to your attention, with the article beginning on page 52.

Thousands of scientific papers appear in technical journals every month; why do some rate more fame and journalistic attention? It helps for science news to have dramatic relevance to human affairs: Is there strong new hope for curing a disease, transforming the economy, building a better mousetrap? Alternatively, reporters and editors may gravitate toward new science that easily inspires the public's sense of wonder, as so many astronomy stories do. And reports that appear in certain major scientific journals tend to get more play because those publications have a self-fulfilling reputation for releasing the most noteworthy papers. (It doesn't hurt that those journals have particularly strong public relations departments, too.)

When we look at submitted manuscripts from scientists, we consider it a reassuring sign when the authors forthrightly acknowledge both their collaborators and their competitors and note potential conflicts of interest before we ask. If we see that they are describing the science of their rivals fairly, we can have more confidence that they are being similarly candid about their own work. (Still, the old nuclear disarmament treaty maxim applies: trust, but verify.) We typically steer away from controversial ideas too new to have much supporting evidence. Those that have lasted for years and accumulated some substantiation have earned consideration. Our judgments are imperfect, but they tend to mirror those of the scientific community.

Blots on a researcher's history often should bear on regard for his or her new work. Scientists who have intentionally published fraudulent papers, as the stem cell researcher Woo Suk Hwang so notoriously did two years ago, may be irredeemably tainted. But to dismiss a scientist solely for holding some wrong or controversial views risks sweeping away valuable nuggets of truth. We respect the opinions of any readers who may criticize our choice to publish Duesberg in this case but hope they will nonetheless evaluate his ideas about cancer on their own merits.