

Academic Turmoil or the Horrors of the Near Future

“The head of pathology told me in strictest confidence that I was going to be fired on Friday and that I should start packing up my office.” Those were the first words out of my mouth as I came in from the garage. My spouse just said, “Then you win. Your day was worse than mine.” It wasn’t unusual for us to compare notes about our work. Her snake pit was the male-dominated world of computer programming, and mine was academic medicine. That doesn’t mean I don’t see patients. In fact, that is how most days are spent, but I am on the lecture circuit giving talks about clinical trials I’ve participated in and talks on my field of dermatology. Giving those talks increases your reputation, which is good for drumming up referrals of interesting patients, which provides fodder for more talks and the cycle repeats itself.

“You got a letter from Canada in today’s mail. Probably another royalty check.” My spouse is an optimist. I opened the letter and there was a royalty check for a few hundred dollars. There was also a letter explaining that our Canadian publisher had sold his business to the People’s Republic of China and that they would be sending any future royalties. It was copied to my co-author in Louisville. Our book was used on several continents and now it was going to be translated into Chinese. The letter explained that the Chinese publishers were under no obligation to provide royalties for the Chinese copies sold. I knew about the change of ownership as I’d gotten an email at work from China telling me much the same thing and requesting my banking information in order to provide direct deposit of future payments. I replied that I would await standard paper transactions and would not be providing my banking info.

“Do you think you’re really going to be fired two days from now?” Inquiring minds wanted to know. I said, “I think I’m being played with by a colleague, but he is on the professional personnel committee. In any event, I haven’t started packing.” I should have remembered something that I learned in medical school. That was that every rumor I ever heard about medical folks turned out to be true. If I had harkened to that bit of folk wisdom, I wouldn’t have been blindsided.

Friday was only normal for about one hour. Just seeing patients and doing my job. But I was summoned to the CEO’s office at nine AM. I was informed that I was to clear out my office in the next few hours and that security would be watching my every move and taking my keys and parking deck card upon my exit from the building. I was being terminated for falsifying research and for violation of the sexual harassment policy. The claim was that credible evidence of the promotion of false medical information had been provided in confidence and there were multiple accusations of sexual harassment from female members of my department. No, I would not be provided with names and no, there would be no appeal. I was fired. I had been at the clinic for nearly twenty years, but none of that seemed to matter. The first order of business was to protect the good name of the clinic. I went home and started calling attorneys looking for someone who might have experience with this sort of legal entanglement. I found one, but he wasn’t optimistic. By five PM, I was on the evening news as a discredited physician and male chauvinist pig. That’s not exactly what they said, but it was clear enough.

It wasn’t long before the scandal spread. There were several other physicians at the same clinic hit with the same sort of very credible accusations. When one physician managed to get a look at the name of one of the women who had pointed a finger at him, he asked the woman what was going on. She said she had nothing to do with it and the story was bogus. Human resources was unimpressed with her retraction as she had been unmasked by accident and it was clear to them that pressure was being exerted to have her retract her written statement.

As the legal processes played out, names were uncovered in discovery and a pattern emerged of the women all professing no knowledge of the reports of harassment. Human resources remained convinced that the initial report was the only one that could be trusted. The accusations of fraudulent medical information turned out to be citations of research that made claims that were either still in dispute or refuted by subsequent studies. Publishing that sort of knowledge was not the same as misrepresenting research as the clinic had claimed. The clinic lawyers had their heels dug in and said that we would let a jury decide.

That month was tumultuous. Every physician at the clinic who had published was fired. All for the same reasons. Bogus medical information and sexual harassment. It was now a national scandal. And by national, I mean it wasn't just our clinic. Now the big clinics in Cleveland, Rochester, Boston, San Diego, and others were all part of the problem. Then it spread to the nation's medical schools from coast to coast. The mainstream media covered each new batch of firings with the same dispassionate demeanor that they covered mass shootings. The politicians didn't offer up thoughts and prayers, but investigations and accusations. The professionals had been allowed too much latitude to regulate themselves.

And then there was the upstart cable news service "Swipe Right News." Their motto is "We get it right so you will always be right." It seems they couldn't say right enough. Their news anchors all were experienced in the field of sexual harassment as they had been fired from places like Fox and NBC for just that offense. They made sure their viewers were told that something this widespread was evidence of a deep state-like plot by the intelligentsia to misinform the public and serve the sexual appetites of these demonic professionals. The Freemasons were suspected of being behind this plot. The ratings soared. Walt O'Really, Matt Loverly, and others were once again must-see TV. Polling showed that the public no longer trusted any medical information that wasn't on social media. Men in white coats were now viewed as wolves in sheep's clothing.

The fact that a simple pattern was repeating itself was lost on the media. It was noted at the NSA. Their analysts suspected that this was a threat to national security. The foundations of our society were unraveling and that was the sort of thing that the NSA stayed up late worrying about. Their computer analysts worked backward to the start of this scandal and found their index case. A dermatologist at a major clinic in New Orleans.

Two men in black suits were at the front door wanting to talk with the doctor. The doctor was under orders from his attorney not to speak with anyone about anything. The suits were persistent. They had badges and they wanted to speak with me about a matter of urgent national security. No, my attorney could not be present, this was not about my legal troubles. At least not directly. My life was so upside down that I figured that a bit of cloak-and-dagger intrigue was just the counterpoint to spice up my drroll existence.

The suits were non-confrontational. That was the first surprise. And they were knowledgeable. They knew about my book, and they knew about the Chinese publisher. They wanted to know if I'd had any contact with the Chinese by computer. I paused before answering. There was the request for my banking information. Did I still have that email? I said that it had come to my computer at work, but I'd forwarded it to my home laptop where I kept all my textbook-related correspondence and research. They asked if they could have my laptop for a few days and if I said no, they would produce the necessary subpoena. I was assured that they would return the laptop and would not disturb any of my research. Damned if you, damned if you don't. Sure, take the laptop.

Two days later the suits returned the laptop. They had found what they were looking for. I asked if they could share that information with me. They said they would as the president would be

addressing the nation later that day to expose the Chinese plot. A simple bit of malware had been part of the email asking for my banking information. Just opening the email was all that was needed to activate this. No downloading required. The simple program instructed Chat GPT to find medical information that I had published that had been replaced by newer information and to write a report to the CEO detailing this information as fraudulent research. It then had Chat GPT identify members of the opposite sex who worked in my department and to draft letters on their behalf giving specific examples of sexual harassment and sending those letters to human resources. The malware was able to insert itself into the clinic's computer system and repeat this process leading to mass firings for the same offenses. The program attached itself to outgoing emails and thus the rest of the country was put into play. The Chat GPT letters were so well crafted that they were always deemed credible. The depth to which administrators delve into such letters for authentication is extremely superficial. The task was handed over to lower-level administrators who were looking to make a name for themselves. Their default mode was to find the letters authentic. Careers were ruined, and society was destabilized. It was almost a success. That would stop tonight when the plot would be exposed.

Meanwhile, in China, an award ceremony was taking place. The Order of the Chairman was being bestowed on a young Chinese computer programmer. He not only received the medal; he also was given a bonus equal to one year's salary and a trip for him and his significant other to Hainan Island. That's China's version of Hawaii. There was grumbling from his fellow programmers. They felt the awardee hadn't done any real work; he'd only put Chat GPT to work. A simple nice pat on the back would be all they thought he was due. But they stayed silent as their comrade gave his acceptance speech. His remarks concluded with a saying he attributed to Confucius. He claimed the saying was that "Your enemy's greatest strength is his greatest weakness." One programmer turned to the other and said, "I don't remember reading that in our studies of Confucius." The other said, "I got a saying just like that in a fortune cookie and gave it to him. It was a gag gift. Sort of a put-down. I wrapped it up and put it on his desk as an anonymous birthday present. And now he's going to Hainan. And getting all that extra pay. I guess the jokes on me." His fellow programmer said, "You and the Americans."

[Author notes. I've been asked where I come up with some of these stories. The last edition of Fisher's Contact Dermatitis that I did with Joe Fowler in Louisville was published by Brian Decker of Hamilton, Canada. He sold his company to the People's Republic of China, and I did get a paper check from them for royalties. The rest of the story is just a riff on things in the daily newspaper.

Submitted by Robert Rietschel, April 11, 2023
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