

PUBLISHING

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The fundamental goal of research is to effect change. It can be easily demonstrated that moderated exposure to new concepts and knowledge through peer review and debate challenges prevailing orthodoxies and ultimately brings about change.

Traditionally, such exposure has involved presentation of research at meetings of learned societies, and running the gauntlet of peer review through publication in quality journals — a pathway which has served science well. But now, under the pressures of competition and commercialism that have become the norm in research, a new phenomenon has emerged. It is, as captioned by one US commentator, “doing science through press releases”.

Now we are inundated by press releases from research institutions or commercial research bodies broadcasting reports on the adverse health of certain community groups, the latest alternative medicine for ameliorating a modern malady, or promising preliminary findings for drugs that may cure cancer. What these publicity missiles have in common is researchers peddling information which has not been subject to the scrutiny of peer review.

The immediate past head of the (US) National Cancer Institute, Samuel Broder, noted that, “It sounds unseemly for scientists to be doing it . . . I just feel that, if scientists have something really good, the facts will unfold. That should be what the scientist really cares about. That is why, at a recent presentation, I asked ‘Why are you wasting your time doing a press conference? Go back to the lab and design more studies and do more research. Publish your papers, write review articles, go to scientific meetings. Let your colleagues know your results, let them criticise your results.’ That’s where I am — or have become — a very strong traditionalist.”

We should heed such traditional advice — *mature lente** . . .

Martin B Van Der Weyden

*Hasten slowly.

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COVER: Painting “Breast Buds” by Susan Shatter, a breast cancer survivor. Other paintings in this exhibit may be viewed on the Breast Cancer Answers Art Gallery Website <<http://canceranswers.org/gallery/surglght.htm>>.