

Malhotra and The Guardian

Dr Aseem Malhotra writes:

I've written a complaint to the editor of the Guardian newspaper and the independent press standards organisation calling for retraction of an article published at the end of October (2018) that appears to have been a deliberate hatchet job on my credibility.

The article which received a lot of publicity at the time was entitled 'Butter nonsense : rise of the cholesterol deniers'. Sadly I was contacted by the journalist who wrote the article, health editor, Sarah Boseley around the time my mum was seriously ill and admitted to hospital so I was unable to respond to her loaded questions. But what happened next can in my view only be described as disgraceful and disgusting gutter journalism.

I'm pleased that I've received very supportive comments from three eminent doctors including the editor in Chief of the BMJ. You can read the full letter below and make your own minds up.

Katherine Viner
Editor in Chief, The Guardian Newspaper
Reader's Editor, The Guardian Newspaper
Board and Complaints Committee
Independent Press Standards Organisation
Gate House
1 Farringdon Street, London
W8 5TT 22/03/2019

Dear Katherine,

I write to you with serious concerns regarding an article that appeared on Tuesday 30th October 2018 titled "Butter nonsense: the rise of cholesterol deniers." <https://www.theguardian.com/.../butter-nonsense-the-rise-of-t...>

The article, written by health editor Sarah Boseley, is misleading, distorted, inaccurate and defamatory.

Given that various Guardian editorial guidelines have been broken, I trust that this will be quickly and efficiently dealt with.

Unless it is fully retracted online, I believe it will continue to cause significant damage to public health with a negative effect on millions of people.

The Guardian has a duty to monitor independence but never more so than when reporting on issues when lives are at stake.

I say this with a background of being a proud Guardian contributor. Since 2008, I have written 19 opinion editorials for the Guardian group including three front page commentaries for the Observer newspaper on the topics of hospitals selling junk food, Too Much Medicine and the threat posed to population health by excess sugar consumption. <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/aseem-malhotra>

Two well-known respected female Guardian columnists who write on food and health contacted me without provocation to express their concerns and disappointment with Boseley's article.

One described Boseley's article as "shockingly bad" and another wrote she'd "never seen a character assassination that long minus a quote from the subject under attack. I certainly would never get away with that."

Personally, I suspect that this article was written for the purpose of undermining my credibility, and the credibility of other respected doctors, scientists and courageous medical journal editors whose primary purpose is to advance legitimate scientific debate and improve population health.

I will make the case below as to why Boseley's article merits retraction, and why the Guardian may benefit from an internal investigation to prevent this happening again and to maintain its credibility as one of the most trusted newspapers in the UK.

The case for retraction

Several days before publication of the article, the head of communications of the respected independent health think-tank, The King's Fund, informed me that Boseley had made an inquiry as to whether I was still a trustee at the Fund and why I was appointed ahead of other candidates. It's important to be aware that The King's Fund is an independent charity seeking to improve healthcare in England. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are>

The head of communications emailed the following reply to Boseley;
“Aseem is a practicing clinician and a public health campaigner and both roles are relevant to his appointment.

We don't have any other practising clinicians or people from a public health background on the board and it was felt that he would bring a useful new perspective.
He is also younger than most of our other trustees(!) and from a BAME background.
These were relevant considerations as we were working to change the profile of the board and bring a greater diversity of perspectives.

The role of a trustee at The King's Fund is to agree the organisation's overall strategic direction and scrutinise the work of the Senior Management Team.

Our trustees' views are not necessarily shared by The King's Fund, but we value their contributions to our organisational strategy and the challenge they bring to our thinking”.
My profile is on the King's Fund website here. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/abo.../whos-who/dr-aseem-malhotra> This includes reference to my Honorary Consultant Cardiologist role in the NHS.

At no point does Boseley mention this in her piece, likely because she went to great lengths to discredit me in the article.

After the alert from the King's Fund, I contacted a close colleague of Boseley at the Guardian, who was not aware that the article was in development, but agreed that this sounded like Boseley was planning an attack on my credentials and credibility and that I should be “very worried as this will remain on the worldwide web forever”.

This journalist, who was familiar with the controversial topic, advised me that anything I said to Boseley would go directly back to Professor Sir Rory Collins of Oxford, a prominent academic who has been publicly critical of those questioning the harms of statins, and more specifically that the rate of side effects of statins are rare. Sarah quotes him in the piece referencing a review he'd carried out on statins in 2016 published in the Lancet. “Our review shows that the numbers of people who avoid heart attacks and strokes by taking statin therapy are very much larger than the numbers who have side-effects with it.” In a 2014 article, again written by Boseley, Professor Collins was quoted as saying “there are only one or two well- documented (problematic) side effects” associated with statins. Myopathy and muscle weakness occurred in “one in 10,000 people” said Collins, and that there was a small increase in diabetes. <https://www.theguardian.com/.../-sp-doctors-fears-over-statin...>

Boseley's colleague advised me that if I was planning to meet with her to answer her questions, that I should record the conversation, implying her untrustworthiness. Unfortunately, I was unable to meet Boseley or respond to her questions via email due to time constraints because I was going to up to Manchester to visit my mum who was seriously ill in hospital, admitted 5 days before publication of her piece on 26th October. Sadly, she subsequently died a few weeks later on 29 November. I have been in mourning and am only just getting a chance to properly respond now.

In Boseley's description of me, she described me as a "young telegenic cardiologist working in private practice". The majority (>95%) of my clinical work in seeing patients is in the NHS. In comparison, I see a small number of private patients in Harley Street on an ad hoc basis. I have three to five sessions a week in the NHS as an Honorary Consultant Cardiologist at Lister Hospital Foundation trust in Stevenage, Hertfordshire.

My academic work and profile as a doctor is based upon my public health advocacy on sugar, tackling obesity, and too much medicine. I also coordinated a campaign with the BMJ and the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges to wind back the harms of too much medicine through a peer-reviewed paper in the BMJ in 2015. Incidentally my co-authors were, the then chair of the academy of medical royal colleges, Professor Dame Sue Bailey and the then Chairman of the GMC, Professor Sir Terence Stephenson. As a result of all my academic publications, advocacy work and trusteeship of the King's Fund I was last year awarded a visiting professorship in evidence-based medicine at the Bahiana School of Medicine and Public Health, Salvador, Brazil. This is quite public, on my twitter handle and also mentioned on the King's Fund website. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/abo.../whos-who/dr-aseem-malhotra>

Yet, Boseley saw it fit to describe me as a "young telegenic cardiologist working in private practice" which clearly misleads the public.

Boseley also commenced the piece stating that most of my publications on cholesterol and statins appear in "minor" medical journals. This is also false. Articles that I have authored and co-authored about cholesterol, statins, shared decision making, and the importance of diet and lifestyle on reducing cardiovascular risk, have been published in the BMJ, BMJ Open Heart, BMJ Open, The Postgraduate Medical Journal, JAMA Internal Medicine, BMC Medicine, and the British Journal of Sports Medicine. None of these journals are considered as "minor".

Specifically, referencing the peer-reviewed editorial published in the British Journal of

Sports Medicine titled, “Saturated fat does not clog the arteries; coronary artery disease is a chronic inflammatory condition, the risk of which can be effectively reduced from healthy lifestyle interventions” which is central to getting opinions of those criticising the article, Boseley states authors as Aseem Malhotra “and colleagues”.

Again, this is clearly attempting to single me out, failing to mention two of my other highly esteemed colleagues. Professor Rita Redberg is a practising cardiologist, academic and editor-in-chief of one of the highest impact factor medical journals in the world, JAMA Internal Medicine.

The other author, Professor Pascal Meier, is a practicing cardiologist, academic and editor-in-chief of BMJ Open Heart.

Why did Boseley fail to acknowledge them in the piece, or seek their comment? It is very puzzling, especially since the publication of the original editorial in the British Journal of Sports Medicine received prominent coverage in the Guardian by Denis Campbell, who sought comment from both Professors Redberg and Meier. <https://www.theguardian.com/.../saturated-fats-heart-attack-r...>

This is important because Boseley’s article implies that those questioning the conventional cholesterol hypothesis and the value of mass prescribing of statin drugs, are a small vocal minority that lack credibility, in comparison to those 'unbiased' experts she chose. Furthermore, last year I spoke alongside the former President of the Royal College of physicians, Sir Richard Thompson in the European parliament on over prescription of medications including statins. This was picked up as a front page story by iNews. <https://inews.co.uk/.../chilcot-style-inquiry-health-experts.../> Sir Richard himself has called for an independent inquiry into statins. <https://www.express.co.uk/.../former-Royal-Queen-doctor-Sir-R...>

Such omissions from Boseley’s article, that credible doctors are challenging the so-called eminent and credible authorities she uncritically cites- is not just bad journalism, it’s grossly negligent and does a huge disservice to Guardian readers.

Boseley also criticises my book, titled The Pioppi Diet, using comment from the British Dietetic Association (BDA), saying it’s one of their “ five worst celeb diet books in Britain”. This is the same BDA which have previously claimed to be “delighted to work with the sugar bureau” and which have a number of corporate sponsors from the ultra-processed food and drink industries.

The BDA's criticism of The Pioppi Diet is based upon distorted and false statements from their spokesperson Sian Porter, who failed to mention is a consultant dietitian to the British Fruit Juice Association, which I have written about in a Men's Health article. This is a relevant conflict of interest as my book specifically advises to cut out all added sugars and fruit juice from the diet. <https://www.menshealth.com/.../the-fight-against-dietary-mis.../>

Furthermore, Boseley uses an organisation such as the BDA, with conflicts of interest, to criticise my book but fails to mention the multitude of independent respected doctors, scientists and dietitians who endorsed the book, including the Chair of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, Professor Dame Sue Bailey, who described the book as a "must have for every household and a must read for every medical student and doctor".

The former chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners Dr Clare Gerada, also gave a very favourable review of the book in the British Journal of General Practice. She wrote; "The book is not just a guide for individuals to rapidly improve their health from making simple lifestyle changes but also explains why policy changes to improve the food environment and our dependence on medicines also needs to happen. In addition, a revision of dietary guidelines is required to reverse the UK's obesity epidemic and sustain the NHS." <https://bjgp.org/content/67/662/414>

Boseley cannot claim ignorance of this as I personally gave her a copy of my book when I met her earlier last year. The endorsements in the first few pages of the book are wide ranging including Sir Richard Thompson, The Chair of the National Obesity Forum, Professor David Haslam, an eminent internationally renowned Professor of diabetes, two independent dietitians with PhDs and a well-respected nutritionist, to name a few.

Furthermore, it is odd that Boseley finds space and time to mention Andy Burnham and Keith Vaz MP as "trying the diet" but fails to mention the most high-profile politician who endorsed the diet - the one who lost almost 100lbs in less than a year following the plan, the one who sparked headlines in every paper for using the diet – the deputy leader of the Labour Party Tom Watson. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBeDoeEKLq4>

I have also declared that I'm giving all personal royalties for book sales to charity.

As mentioned earlier, Professor Sir Rory Collins of Oxford, is quoted in the piece voicing his concerns that media scaremongering on statin side effects is endangering lives. Unlike Professor Collins who is an academic who does not see patients, I have, for almost two decades, prescribed and managed thousands of patients taking statins. It is doctors on the

front line that have gained the greatest insight into the side effects that interfere with the quality of life for many patients.

In fact Professor Rory Collins who unsuccessfully called for the retraction of two BMJ articles (one which I published) initially through a front page story in the Guardian in 2014 (again written by Boseley) because of the suggestion that we had exaggerated the incidence of side effects, including speaking on BBC Radio 4's Today programme that our 20% side effect figure was exaggerated by more than 20 times filed a patent in 2009 for a test that detects susceptibility to statin side effects. This was being sold directly to the consumer in the United States for US\$99 under a claim that 29% of all statin users experience significant muscle symptoms, weakness or cramps and that 58% of patients stop taking them within a year, mostly because of muscle pain.

This was exposed in an investigation by the Sunday Times in 2016. Professor Collins told the Sunday Times this claim was "misleading" and he waived any personal fees from its sale. Shortly afterwards the website was taken down but a number of important questions remain that in my view require a full explanation and investigation. If statin side effects were as rare as Professor Collins has been very publicly claiming, then why was he a co-inventor of this test?

Also a freedom of information request to Oxford University from chief reporter of the Sunday Times Jon Ungoed Thomas which has not been publicised (attached) reveals that the University of Oxford received in excess of £300,000 and Professor Collins department received in excess of £100,000 over four years.

"Revenue from the licence granted to Boston Heart Diagnostics is paid to Oxford University Innovation (OUI). In the four years since the licence has been in place, OUI has transferred a total of £369,772.74 to the University. Of this amount, CTSU has received £126,196.13, including £96,518.94 that would otherwise have been paid to the inventors if they had not waived their rights."

For how long did his department receive money from the sale of this product, which promoted and advertised that 29% of all statin users will experience muscle symptoms? As you can imagine this only fuels concerns that the true rate of side effects is considerably higher than what Professor Collins states from his published reviews on the benefits of statins.

It's also been brought to my attention that Professor Collins who filed the patent in 2009

failed to declare this in at least one subsequent publication. Although I have no strong opinion on this as it may have been a simple error on his part, a recent editorial in JAMA suggests it's time to consider "the intentional or negligent failure to disclose significant financial relationships relevant to the conduct of research to be research misconduct" <https://jamanetwork.com/journ.../jama/article-abstract/2712193>

In my view, this needs investigating especially since Boston Heart diagnostics, that were granted the license and responsible for advertising the test, stood by its claim that 29% of people experience muscle symptoms. From the Sunday Times;
"The test, branded as Statin-Smart, is sold online for \$99 (£76) on a website that claims 29% of statin users will suffer muscle pain, weakness or cramps. The marketing material also claims that 58% of patients on statins stop taking them within a year, mostly because of muscle pain."

"Boston Heart Diagnostics said it stood by its claims about statin side effects and that they were based on published research. It also cited a US taskforce on statin safety that said randomised controlled trials — such as those used in the Lancet study led by Collins — had "major limitations" because patients with statin intolerance were often excluded."
This is all the more extraordinary and puzzling given that Professor Collins was quoted by Boseley in the Guardian in 2014 saying "there are only one or two well- documented (problematic) side effects" Myopathy and muscle weakness occurred in one in 10,000 people he said and there was a small increase in diabetes" .

The reason I draw attention to this is because I sent the following email to Boseley and health policy editor Denis Campbell shortly after I was forwarded by Sunday Times journalist the Freedom of Information response from the University of Oxford but with no reply from either journalist. I had hoped this was worthy of being reported in the Guardian given it's history on the topic of statin drugs.

Dear Sarah and Denis,

I attach a recent editorial I co-authored with John Abramson of Harvard, lead researcher of the Lyon Heart Study, Cardiologist and Nutritionist, Michel de-lorgeril and the new president of the international vascular society professor sheriff sultan.

The Guardian has been referenced in particular Rory Collins comments to you Sarah in March 2014.

I also wanted to draw your attention to the second attachment shared with me by the Sunday Times regarding payment that has gone to Oxford and the CTSU from a device that Professor Collins co-invented to detect a gene that tells an individual whether they're likely to suffer significant muscle symptoms from taking a statin. Until recently the test was being sold to consumers in the USA under a claim that 29% of all statin users will suffer significant muscle symptoms.

He apparently filed this patent in 2009 and according to John Abramson hadn't declared in several Lancet papers published in the past few years.

One respected researcher informs me that this is an offence that could result in referral to the GMC?! Maybe a bit harsh in my view.

Please excuse me if I'm jumping the gun here but given all that's been happening isn't this a major COI irrespective. Also should Rory's department return the money they've earned from this 'misleading' marketing claim ? The whole issue is a complete mess especially as there are now legitimate questions over whether there are any benefits in high risk/secondary prevention. De-Lorgeril is convinced there are none at all!

Blimey!!

Best

Aseem

Following publication of Boseley's article "Butter nonsense..." there seemed to be quite a reaction on social media which was quite negative from respected doctors. One example is from Dr JS Bamrah CBE the chairman of the British Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (BAPIO) the organisation that played a key role in the defence of the well-publicised Bawa Garba case. Dr Bamrah who is also a Guardian contributor tweeted:

" @sarahbosely is changing the face of medical journalism by such biased, crude, one sided reporting. I just wonder what her incentive is to attack you (referencing myself) in this way. Might she be too cosy with the other side? Can't think of any other motive. "

To conclude, as a proud Guardian contributor for over a decade it is clear that "Butter nonsense : the rise of the cholesterol deniers" is an inaccurate, misleading, distorted and defamatory article that is not worthy of the Guardian newspaper. Therefore, I request that you consider it for immediate retraction from the world wide web. I have also copied in the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and the Guardian reader's editor. In my view, failure to retract the article may cause considerable damage to public health, and discourage the legitimate advancement of scientific debate on an ongoing controversial issue that effects hundreds of millions of people globally. I look forward to your response.

Yours Sincerely

Dr Aseem Malhotra

Honorary Consultant Cardiologist, Lister Hospital, Stevenage

Visiting Professor of Evidence Based Medicine, Bahiana School of Medicine and Public Health, Salvador, Brazil

International Guest Editor – Journal of Evidence Based Healthcare

King's Fund Trustee

Reacting to my letter are the editor in chief of the BMJ, Dr Fiona Godlee, Past President of the Royal College of Physicians, Sir Richard Thompson and Chairman of the British Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (BAPIO) Dr JS Bamrah CBE.

Dr Fiona Godlee, Editor in chief of the BMJ said:

“The debate about who should take statins is clearly still very much alive. The Guardian article seemed to be a blatant attempt to suppress that debate by attempting to discredit those who question the merits of statins in people at low risk of heart disease. The article was misleading and fell well short of the standards for accuracy or impartiality expected of a credible and trusted publication. I believe it needs at least very substantial correction.”
Sir Richard Thompson, Past President of the Royal College of Physicians said.

“There is currently a scientific debate whether 1. Cardiovascular disease is closely related to the levels of cholesterol in blood 2. Whether the benefits of statins are large enough to justify their widespread prescription 3. The frequency of side effects from statins. Attacking doctors who genuinely hold opposite views, such as labelling them ‘cholesterol or statin deniers’, should be no part of this healthy debate; rather we must all try to move towards a scientific consensus for the benefit of patients’.

Dr JS Bamrah CBE, Chairman of BAPIO said:

“I fully support Dr Malhotra’s calls for retraction of Sarah Bosely’s ‘Butter nonsense’ article. The roles of cholesterol and statins in the prevention and treatment of heart disease has been of great interest to the public as well as medical professionals. Dr Aseem Malhotra has been a driving and dominant force for keeping this ‘alive’ in the public domain. His cogently and rationally argued stance has gained him many admirers and made thousands of people exert better control over their health by sensible dietary changes and more exercise. As a practising cardiologist he understands better than most the advantages of self control rather than too much medicine. We ignore his key messages to our peril.”