# How To Succeed in Science

## David Grimes, Oxford, The Wellcome Trust and the Art of Name Dropping

## Junk Science in a JAMA Journal

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David Robert Grimes is a "got lemons, make lemonade" kind of guy. Or as his famous Irish countryman Oscar Wilde quipped more than 100 years ago, "a grapefruit is just a lemon that saw an opportunity and took advantage of it."

Well, actually, though that line is attributed to Wilde on countless websites, he never said or wrote it. The first documented use was more than a decade after he died in Paris in 1900. But given so, it seems all the more appropriate to mention it in the context of the Grimes affair.

I bring all this up because I'm still trying to understand why *JAMA Oncology* would have commissioned or accepted a manuscript on a hotly controversial subject —a review of radiofrequency (RF) radiation and cancer— by a junior Irish academic-cum-columnist without any relevant qualifications, David Robert Grimes, at the time of Dublin City University.

I have already —now among many others— called for the retraction of his paper. That's most likely not going to happen. I've even heard on the grapevine that the editors of the journal, tearing a page out of a Soviet-style rulebook, are forbidding the mention of the word "retract" in letters published in response to Grimes's review.

I return to this again because once Grimes's review is embedded in the medical literature it will become lore. It will be cited —ad nauseam— as the final word. JAMA says that RF is cancer safe and, if that's what the American Medical Association says, it must be true.

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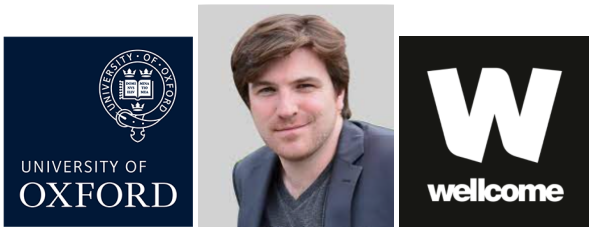
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*JAMA Oncology* has a sky-high impact factor, the standard metric of a journal's influence. It was over 30 in 2020 —most publishers would be thrilled with a 3! An impact factor is an index of how often a journal's papers are cited. If history repeats as it surely will, Grimes's paper will appear in reference lists for years to come—cited especially by those who know nothing about RF biology but are looking for a quick citation to show it's settled science.

The only way out is retraction. But, as I said, it won't happen. If only because conservative institutions like the AMA don't want to be seen as caving in to pressure, even if a former long-time director of one of the National Institutes of Health, Linda Birnbaum, is voicing objections. Retraction might undermine the AMA's authority. The last editor-in-chief of the JAMA Network resigned under a cloud. His replacement, Phil Fontanarosa, probably doesn't want to make any waves, at least until he can drop the "interim" from his current title.

Why then did Nora Disis, the editor of *JAMA Oncology,* and Monica Morrow, the journal's associate editor for reviews, look favorably on Grimes's deeply flawed paper, which could have been lifted from a Vodafone press release?



David Robert Grimes and his calling cards

Part of the reason is that Grimes was repeating the well-worn meme that RF bioeffects are nothing more than junk science. My bet is his message struck a responsive chord. The editors were all too ready to believe that that there's no link to cancer, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

The other part of the equation is that they were snowed by Grimes's credentials —at least those he was advertising. He must have told them he was a "cancer researcher" at the University of Oxford and was working on a grant from the Wellcome Trust, a highly prominent English medical charity. That's what he's been telling people for years.

The facts are far less clear. Or, as one wag recently said of Boris Johnson, he doesn't have a monogamous relationship with the truth.

## Playing the Oxford Card

I've already detailed Grimes's tenuous association with Oxford (read about it here). In short, Grimes was a post-doc at Oxford but his appointment ended in early 2017. By the time he submitted his review to *JAMA Oncology*, Grimes had little more than an Oxford library card, according to Mark Middleton, the head of the university's Department of Oncology. He had no obvious basis to call himself a Fellow, visiting or otherwise.

Over the years, thousands of scientists in Grimes's generation have been post-docs at Oxford and Cambridge. But few capitalize on those associations so unscrupulously after they've moved on. Not so Grimes. *Every* paper he has published after 2017 includes an Oxford affiliation: Some to the Department of Oncology, but all link back to the University. Nor did Grimes update his LinkedIn page. It continued to state that he was an Oxford "visiting research fellow" until he took down his entire entry at the beginning of the year after the *JAMA Oncology* review brought unexpected attention to his qualifications.

Grimes has played the Oxford card on the journalism front too. In a previous and equally confounding incident a bit over two years ago, *Scientific American* allowed Grimes to attack Joel Moskowitz of UC Berkeley for calling for more health research on 5G radiation. Grimes took a sensational tack: He accused Moskowitz of "scaremongering."

What makes the *SciAm* case so striking is that Mike Lemonick, its chief opinion editor at the time —he made the call to run Grimes's diatribe— is a seasoned, well-respected science writer. He had previously told Moskowitz that he would not allow anyone to respond to his commentary. "No, I don't plan to publish a rebuttal to your rebuttal," Lemonick wrote in an email.

When Moskowitz later asked why he had changed his mind, Lemonick replied that Grimes had contacted him and made a "persuasive case" that it needed to be done. I can almost hear Grimes telling Lemonick, "I am a cancer researcher at the University of Oxford and I know better." Whatever he said, Lemonick buckled. In the published author ID, *SciAm* advises that Grimes is a "cancer researcher" and a "visiting researcher at the University of Oxford." (More on the *SciAm* story here.)

This begs the question about what kind of cancer research Grimes did at Oxford. Yes, he did do some. It was highly specialized stuff: for example, building computer models to investigate the relationship between tumor growth and oxygen concentration. The important point here is that it had nothing to do with epidemiology or toxicology, the two key fields on which the question of RF radiation and cancer turns —or, indeed, anything at all to do with RF radiation.

## Wellcome Trust Doesn't Mind

Whether Grimes also told Lemonick that he had a research grant from the Wellcome Trust would add another layer of speculation. I wouldn't bet against it.

The Wellcome Trust is one of the world's largest charities with assets of some $50 billion —bigger than the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and on par with the Gates Foundation. Its mission is to help "improve health through research." Grants from the Wellcome Trust are highly competitive and very prestigious. They not only pay for studies but open doors that might otherwise stay closed.

Grimes received a two-year, $150,000 (£107,312) grant from Wellcome in 2018, a year after he left Oxford. At the time, he had no institutional home. By the time the grant got under way in July 2019, he had secured a two-year appointment as a research fellow in the Department of Surgery at Trinity College Dublin. (Yes, surgery. I don't know why.)

Within a couple of months, he decamped and moved across town to Dublin City University where he became an assistant professor in the School of Physical Sciences. The following summer, his title changed from professor to senior research fellow. That too came to an end in December 2021 when his Wellcome Trust grant ran out. (Wellcome had extended it for a few months from the original two years.) Today, Grimes appears to be, once again, without an academic home.

The rub with the Wellcome grant is what Grimes said he would do with the money: Build computer models to detect questionable science. This, he claimed, would help improve scientific integrity.

Posted below is the stated description of his project, taken directly from the Wellcome Trust website. (Grimes's full grant entry is here.)

| Title | Description |
| --- | --- |
| Investigating and improving science trustworthiness through mathematical modelling | It is imperative that both researchers and the general public have confidence in results from science and medicine - the scientific method itself pivots on the concept that findings are replicable. Unfortunately, much published science and medicine falls short of this standard, and in many fields there is growing concern about an emerging reproducibility crisis. There is urgent need to quantify the scope of the problem, and quantify the impact different factors have in shaping the sub-optimal paradigm. Mathematical modelling is ideal for this purpose, as it allows powerful and flexible insight into a wealth of factors that sculpt research trustworthiness. Crucially, it also allows exploration of factors we cannot easily measure or detect, pin-pointing as to how precisely these might manifest. This proposal has three interrelated aims.<br><br>1. To create realistic simulations of the research eco-system to understand how science trustworthiness evolves under different pressures, interventions, and incentives.<br><br>2. To use these model simulations in collaboration with other meta-research groups to inform and improve research policy for fellow scientists, funders, and the wider research community<br><br>3. To contribute to development of new tools for analysing statistical / image manipulations, in addition to training scientists to avoid misconduct: |

The project has no apparent connection to RF radiation or cancer or epidemiology or toxicology. That the stated objective of the grant was to improve "science trustworthiness" simply adds a dollop of irony to this whole affair.

I asked Alyson Fox, the director of research funding at the Wellcome Trust and the officer in charge of policing misconduct, whether it was acceptable for a grantee to state that a piece of work was funded by the Trust if that work had no substantive relationship to the stated purpose of the grant. Apparently so.

Anne Taylor, one of Fox's assistants, replied. Here's part of what she wrote:

> "It is acceptable for a Wellcome grant to be referenced if the work was completed whilst the investigator's salary was being paid by us, whether it is work from that particular project or from other funding they have secured. However, we accept that the phrasing in the acknowledgement does not reflect this. We also note that this particular publication is a review and not original research."

According to PubMed, Grimes has not published any papers on computer modelling since getting his Wellcome grant (despite what he called an “urgent need”).

What then did Grimes do with the Wellcome money? The details should be in the final report required under the Trust’s rules. Taylor declined to release what Grimes might have submitted.

**Enter John Ioannidis**

Two years before he started working on the Wellcome grant, Grimes wrote a paper on exactly the kind of work he promised to do with the Trust’s money. It was titled “Modelling Science Trustworthiness Under Publish or Perish Pressure.” No doubt it helped him win the grant.

One of Grimes’s coauthors of that paper was John Ioannidis, a superstar professor at Stanford University and one of the most droppable names in the science integrity arena —if not in all of science. More recently, his stature has taken a hit following his prediction that COVID would claim only 10,000 American lives. At this writing, he is off by a factor of 100.

Ioannidis’s landmark work, “Why Most Published Research Findings Are False,” came out in 2005. It is the “most-accessed article in the history of Public Library of Science,” according to the Stanford website. It has had some 3 million hits. Ioannidis is also remarkably prolific. The paper with Grimes is just one of more than 100 publications he coauthored in 2017-2018 *alone*, according to PubMed.

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What’s the lesson here? Do what it takes to get ahead, and, if you bend the facts to your advantage along the way, not to worry. You’ll probably get away with it. Large institutions will not bring you to task. Not the University of Oxford, not the Wellcome Trust, and, sad to say, not the august journals of the American Medical Association.

And if public health suffers along the way? No problem.

I wonder whether Nora Disis and Phil Fontanarosa will ever regret spreading misinformation by allowing a junk review into the JAMA family of journals. And, whether anyone will ever regret not demanding more honesty and accountability on the possible health impacts of wireless radiation that so permeates our lives.

## Grimes Issues Revised CoI

**April 21, 2022**

Today, *JAMA Oncology* published three letters —all critical— of David Robert Grimes’s review of RF radiation and cancer:

- Olga Naidenko of the Environmental Working Group, Washington DC;
- David Carpenter, Lennart Hardell and Cindy Sage of the University of Albany (NY), Örebro University Hospital (Sweden) and Sage Associates, Santa Barbara (CA), respectively;
- Najmeh Jooyan and Mohammadjavad Mortazavi of the Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (Iran).

Together with a reply from Grimes.

Appended to his reply is a revised Conlflict of Interest Disclosure to include "relevant" conflicts, which were "inadvertently" omitted in the original publication. Here is the full text of the revised CoI:

> **Conflict of Interest Disclosures:** Dr Grimes reported receiving grants from the Wellcome Trust (funder had no role in research or approval/review of results) and has written articles on misconceptions and conspiracy theories surrounding radiofrequency radiation in scholarly and lay publications, but has not received industry funding for these articles. He reported having received payment for an appearance in an informational video for Vodafone UK countering conspiracy theories about 5G, specifically on purported links to COVID-19 and cancer, and donated these fees to Médecins Sans Frontières. He also reported receiving paid royalties for a popular science book (with multiple editions) that addresses health disinformation, appraisal of evidence, and critical thinking, and receiving fees and honoraria for contributed articles, fact-checking, public talks, and media appearances.

## Grimes Is Now a 'Retraction Watch Sleuth'

**February 21, 2026**

A news item from last year we missed at the time.

In June 2025, Retraction Watch, a project of the Center for Science Integrity which maintains a database of retractions, expressions of concern and related publishing events, named David Robert Grimes as one of its two inaugural 'Sleuths in Residence.' It is a one-year, paid appointment.

In its announcement, RW does not mention Grimes's relationship to the University of Oxford, nor to the Wellcome Trust —though RW does call him a "cancer scientist."

*David Robert Grimes, JAMA Oncology, JAMA Network, University of Oxford, Wellcome Trust, Nora Disis, Phil Fontanarosa, Michael Lemonick, Scientific American, Joel Moskowitz, cancer, John Ioannidis, Olga Naidenko, David Carpenter, Lennart Hardell, Cindy Sage, Najmeh Jooyan, Mohammadjavad Mortazavi, Retraction Watch,*

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