No news without new scientific ideas

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In this editorial, it is strongly advocated that a change of policy is warranted in order to prevent neuroscience from becoming a waste of time and money in the 21st century. Repeating the same trick in different patient populations and perusing the scientific literature seems to currently be the backbone of medical science. However, this approach does not provide knowledge on how the brain works or how specific dysfunctions result in specific diseases. Therefore, earlier findings should, first, be combined to develop new theories on the mechanics of the mind, and, second, these new ideas should be tested in well-designed experiments.

A well-known phenomenon in radiology is unexpected malignancies being overlooked on routine X-rays. My father had an X-ray of his chest in June 1982 that, retrospectively, clearly showed a bronchus tumor, which only became symptomatic in September 1982 and caused his death in May of the following year. When you do not know what to look for, even the most obvious aberrations are easily missed. This limitation of diagnostic capabilities is not a human flaw, but is intricately connected to the theory of knowledge. Scientific findings cannot be interpreted without the proper prerequisites, ie, a model to explain the background of the observations.

The theory of knowledge specifies at least 2 different strategies for finding a representation of the truth.1,2 The first strategy is to deduce a model from complex observations that can correctly predict the occurrence of a phenomenon. The second approach is formed by an empirical cycle; observations lead, by a process termed “induction,” to a theory that results from deducing the development of a hypothesis. This hypothesis is either confirmed or falsified by new observations, which should lead to adaptation of the theory. The necessity of following these rules in order to create something new makes science an art form that is driven by human intelligence.

However, disappointment is unavoidable when considering many of the scientific papers currently being published in medical journals. Many studies do not start with something similar to the above procedure. Unfortunately, the authors of many papers seem to have more interest in repeating a trick applied in an earlier paper. The most important aspect of doing science seems to be having your name in a prominent place on a paper published in one of the top-10 journals in a field. Since the advent of evidence-based medicine, a tremendous need has emerged to repeat randomized, controlled comparisons of all types of treatments. Thousands of patients are tested according to strict protocols in order to calculate characteristics, such as the “number needed to treat.” During this process, the results of many separate studies are combined in a meta-analysis.

The same is now true for investigations of the mechanisms that underlie certain mental disorders, such as neuroimaging studies to elucidate the mechanism underlying depression. This research started with an estimation of the brain structures that are more or less active in significantly depressed patients. Studies then followed to elucidate the correct sequence and magnitude of activation. In May 2013, 3888 citations existed in PubMed for fMRI studies of patients with depression, 340 of which were clinical studies and 456 review articles. Forty-three of the review articles claimed to have followed a systematic approach. This strategy of perusing the scientific literature is very useful for distinguishing between methodological artifacts and true findings. However, this approach provides little

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information about how the brain works and how depression occurs. In the 1950s to the 1970s, psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapists could describe how the mind works in great detail and how various types of mental disorders occur. Unfortunately, the therapists had no evidence to support their theories. Today, the situation is reversed; we have an abundance of data about a number of specified physiological, electronic, and biochemical processes and substances within the brains of normal and sick people, but nobody dares to reflect on how the brain works or how mental disorders occur. Such papers will probably not be accepted due to a lack of supporting evidence.

In this issue of CNS Spectrums, Alan Pehrson and Connie Sanchez summarize evidence that supports an interaction between the serotonergic and glutamatergic neurotransmitter systems that provides relief from depression. The observation that intravenous administration of the noncompetitive N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptor antagonist ketamine induces an almost immediate mood change in depressed patients was an important starting point for the search for interactions that possibly explain the antidepressant mood-relieving effects of ketamine. Only such a theory can help us develop new effective treatment strategies.

In my opinion, medical science has had many undesirable developments in the 21st century. We should appreciate the general rules of the philosophy of science again. Nothing new will happen in science without new ideas, theories, models, and hypotheses that we can test for validity and drop when we falsify them.

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REFERENCES: