LETTER TO THE EDITOR

How should repeated gross mistakes in textbooks be treated?

Milorad Letić
Department of Biophysics, School of Medicine, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia

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TO THE EDITOR: Incorrect items or errors and gross mistakes or blunders in textbooks occasionally appear and are usually quickly detected and attended to. However, some blunders persist uncorrected for long periods. More than 100 years ago, Goode (1) stated, “It has been interesting to me for a number of years to notice how easily a blunder may be paraded and handed on from book to book in high honor, when a single careful thought would prove to any scientific person its absurdity.”

At the time the cited sentence was written, the practice was to describe the blunder and list titles and authors of books that contained blunders and to publish them in scientific journals to correct them and eliminate the possibility of reappearance in the future. It was natural to expect that the evolution of such a practice from 120 years ago would lead to the system that prevents blunders from spreading and parading through books, especially well-known and respected textbooks.

The evolution took a different course. The term error is most frequently used for all sorts of deviations that appear in print, including blunders. Errors are considered normal in books and even more so on the Internet. Although there are several traditional and modern ways that textbook authors and publishers try to correct errors (e.g., inviting readers to signal errors, posting corrections on a web site, or printing a sheet of errata and corrections), the appearance of repeated blunders in several editions of a textbook demonstrates the system’s shortcomings. Besides, there is widespread opinion that it is not a task of scientific journals, even ones devoted to education and teaching, to correct errors in textbooks. Mentioning author names may be considered as bashing authors. Therefore, the blunder that inspired this letter is not cited. The effect of the above-mentioned practice is that errors are often ignored. Ignoring errors inevitably stimulates their spread. The spread of significant errors in several editions of a well-established textbook and other textbooks in the same discipline might influence many generations. Interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity actually facilitate such occurrences. Parading blunders ought to be viewed as a systematic error. It should be described and corrected and its causes investigated and analyzed (2). It is much more appropriate that this task be performed by scientific journals rather than be initially directed toward other media. If ignored, such blunders may persist for years, even decades, and produce unpredictable adverse effects.

DISCLOSURES
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REFERENCES

Address for reprint requests and other correspondence: M. Letić, Institut za Biofiziku, Medicinski Fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu Višegradska, 26/II 11000 Belgrade, Serbia (e-mail: milet@rcub.bg.ac.rs).