



# An acceptance speech

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## KEYWORDS

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I am greatly honoured to receive the inaugural Harwood Prize for Intellectual Courage. Edward C. Harwood was a remarkable intellectual, thriving at Rensselaer and MIT before founding the American Institute for Economic Research (AIER). A West Point graduate, during World War II he was decorated for his courage with the Legion of Merit and a Bronze Star medal. I cautiously hope this information is correct, because I found it in Wikipedia. Conversely, personally I doubt my qualifications as an intellectual. For many years now, I have admitted in my Stanford webpage that I know next to nothing and the pandemic only made me even more aware that I know next to nothing. As for courage, every winter I fear the flu and struggle (often in vain) to avoid it. Whenever I get sick with anything minor, I am an impatient patient, anything but courageous. My only claim to intellectual courage may be some stubborn insistence on seeking the best evidence. This includes prominently the freedom of trying and failing, making mistakes and, hopefully, correcting them. Science is not a predetermined narrative intolerant of obvious refutations. Dogma is not why as researchers we fall in love with science.

This does not mean that there are not many things that we know well and require committed action. Unless we do something, tobacco will kill one billion people within a century. With threatening climate change, widespread environmental degradation and absurd war atrocities, civilized humanity may not even survive that long. Hundreds of millions suffer hunger. Even more lack optimal healthcare and good education opportunities. Inequalities, racism, corruption and authoritarianism ravage humankind. Only hard work with unwavering integrity may reverse these odds. We should empower free citizens with unbiased evidence. Then, there are many other topics where science knows little to none. We should commit to learn with dignity and tolerance for opposing views.

Several years ago in an essay honouring my late mentor David Sackett I described myself as a failure, acknowledging my inability to counter the ongoing hijacking of evidence-based medicine. During the pandemic, hijacking escalated. Evidence became politicized, polarized, misinformed, disinformed beyond imaginable limits. Countering the devastation of evidence-based medicine almost became a mission impossible. I applaud the many scientists who worked dispassionately under unfavourable circumstances. Their brilliance and commitment saved lives and illuminated understanding.

Over the years I have received anonymous, pseudonymous and eponymous attacks and threats from Big Tobacco, spurious entrepreneurs, climate change deniers, anti-vaxxers, various corrupt politicians (of the entire spectrum from extreme-right to extreme-left), paid and unpaid allies and instruments of all the above and more. In all cases, my writings and my positions are to blame, it was all my fault. Attacks, threats and death threats have diversified along with technological advances. They include (but are not limited to) receiving an abusive incoherent letter with dust suggestive of anthrax in 2001; wise admonitions that if I annoy again the medical-industrial complex Albanian hitmen will strangle me in my office; gentle arm twisting from the general counsel of Theranos to recant and coauthor an enthusiastic editorial with the CEO of their wonderful, highly-praised company; plain vanilla harassment with cute humiliating cartoons and strawman distortions of my writings; generous advice to quit science and medicine and stick to poetry or else be destroyed; and death threats coupled with massive cyber-bullying, collateral harm of high-tech Big Tech marvels. Nevertheless, I continue to believe that science is the best thing that can happen to humans. I said that much in an interview filmed at Stanford, stressing the words: '*Science is the best thing that can happen to humans!*'. Well, I must have said

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something really horrible, because then the interview was censored by YouTube.

I don't regret these attacks. No good deed goes unpunished. I do regret, however, that even the lives of my family members were endangered. Many wounds are too fresh to describe. Let me just mention here that even my 87 year old mother suffered a life-threatening hypertensive crisis from a social media hoax claiming that she had died from coronavirus, as she received many phone calls asking her about the funeral. I also regret that many young scientists seeing me brutally attacked became intimidated that integrity nowadays is only for losers: hiding in the mob, being complacent, conflicted and/or dishonest wins the day. I consider myself entirely insignificant among 30 million publishing scientists worldwide. However, too many scientists were bullied. Whenever bullying and censorship were celebrated and well-intentioned scholars were trashed, many more self-censored. Cancellation and self-cancellation triumphed. I feel sorrow for everyone who received unfair treatment. I am particularly sad whenever people who disagreed with me were attacked. If smearing must happen, please smear me, not those who disagree with me.

My work focuses on bias; therefore, I am certainly biased here. Bias is inherent to human nature. COVID-19 severely challenged our human nature. We need sufficient distance to fathom what happened. Who remains objective when death, grief and fear strike? Some of my friends and colleagues lost beloved elderly relatives to COVID-19. The 14-year old nephew of a member of my core team killed himself during lockdown. The young partner of a close friend jumped from a balcony. One of my early-career collaborators perished under conditions suggesting iatrogenic death or suicide. Many friends and colleagues suffered mentally. Others lost their jobs, witnessed violence, saw their families broken. My beautiful university campus became a ghost town for long. Other scientists may also be biased for their own reasons and intimate experiences. The question is, can we still join forces to defend humanity?

During the first shelter-in-place, on my daily walks I talked with a gracious homeless lady who slept on a pavement. It was a painful daily reminder that science should help humans. One day, she disappeared. What happened to her? What could I do so that others would not share harsh, uncertain fates?

Months later, on a summer night, walking in Berlin with my wife we came across a street musician singing softly. A few people had gathered around her, some watching her performance, others closing their eyes to cherish the music, yet others inspecting cautiously their social distancing. She asked that small audience to sing with her. The question is, can we still sing together? Can we be together? Science and life are full of unanswered questions.

On my suggestion, the \$100,000 funds of the Harwood Prize were offered directly as charity from AIER to Children Incorporated and the Lunchbox Fund, two not-for-profit organizations that help poor, disadvantaged children. I dread the vast inequality and unfairness that undermines our legacy as a civilized species and marginalizes the future of younger generations.

I remain indebted to thousands of scientists who have worked with me or criticized my work with constructive arguments and evidence. I thank even those who have smeared me. I would not have been awarded this prize without the astute scholarship of the former and the wonderful ingenuity of the latter. I wish the best for all from the bottom of my heart.

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

This is the acceptance speech I gave at the inaugural Harwood Prize for Intellectual Courage ceremony (<https://events.aier.org/bastiatmastercalendar/detail/1377/1662505200000>) at Dallas in September 2022. I had no previous relationship or interaction with AIER before this Prize. I have no political affiliations and I believe that science should not be shadowed by politics. I also believe that we should not talk only to those who agree with us. As described above, my writings and positions are to blame for any attacks I have received. A full list of my writings can be found at <https://profiles.stanford.edu/john-ioannidis> for my scientific work (specifically for COVID-19 work, in the folder Projects > COVID-19 published work at <https://profiles.stanford.edu/john-ioannidis?tab=research-and-scholarship>) and in <https://sites.google.com/view/johnpaioannidis> for my literature books. This piece was rejected by two major medical journals both of which said that they liked it very much but declined it. I am a member of the editorial board of JECP.