

Report on Research Compliance Volume 18, Number 7. June 24, 2021 Research Integrity ‘Whistleblower’: Don’t Ignore Outsiders, Train Senior Investigators

By Theresa Defino

Elisabeth Bik will not be silenced.

While Bik, who has a doctorate in microbiology, has been active in calling out fraudulent research for several years, she gained more attention—and unpleasant backlash—when she raised questions about a March 2020 paper that proclaimed the benefits of hydroxychloroquine (in combination with azithromycin) for COVID-19.^[1]

Written by a team of French scientists, the article beget others and began a stampede that led to hydroxychloroquine being embraced by then-President Trump and an emergency use authorization being granted by the Food and Drug Administration—only to be revoked three months later amid findings that not only did the drug not work, but it had serious cardiac and other side effects.^[2] The authors’ response to Bik? As of a talk she gave in June, tweeting her address and reportedly asking a local prosecutor to investigate her for supposed harassment and extortion—allegations she strongly denies. Bik told RRC that she has not been contacted by French authorities related to these claims.

“It’s important to know that this is just trying to silence me,” Bik said. “If they attack me and my private life and dox my home address, it means that they don’t have answers to the scientific [questions] that I’m raising.”

Her life has been “ripped apart,” Bik said, adding that “without a lot of followers on Twitter”—she has 102,400—“and the support I’m receiving,^[3] I would have given up a long time ago.” Not only did she not give up, but last month she took a deeper dive into work by this same group, posting what she called part one of a series of articles on “image concerns” and other problems in 22 of their other papers.^[4]

But French researchers aren’t Bik’s only target, and she warned attendees at a recent conference that she will similarly hold U.S. investigators and institutions to account as well—and offered some thoughts on improving integrity.^[5] One tip: Just because she’s an “outsider” doesn’t mean she is a whistleblower who can be ignored.

For more than a decade, Bik was an academic “insider,” though not necessarily a whistleblower. After earning a doctorate from Utrecht University in the Netherlands, Bik spent 15 years at the Stanford University School of Medicine where she researched microbiomes of humans and marine mammals.

Interest Grew After 2016 Paper

The issue of image manipulation—and Bik’s profile—got a boost in June 2016 when she and two co-authors published a paper showing nearly 4% of images they visually screened “contained problematic figures, with at least half exhibiting features suggestive of deliberate manipulation.”^[6] The reviewed images were among 20,621 papers published in 40 scientific journals from 1995 to 2014.

Two years ago Bik became a self-employed research integrity consultant and now can say, ruefully, that she has “earned an army of trolls and enemies who are always asking me, ‘Who is paying you?’” (Answer: publishers,

universities and others; not pharmaceutical companies.) “I’m as independent as I can possibly be,” she told attendees at the annual Health Care Compliance Association Research Compliance Conference; HCCA is the publisher of *RRC*.

Bik said she is not alone in her methods but may be the only person engaged in the work full time. She and others can post comments, anonymously or with their names, on websites such as www.pubpeer.com. Her critiques appear on <https://scienceintegritydigest.com>.

Papers may contain fabrication, falsification or plagiarism as federal regulations define them, but “there could also be all kinds of errors. The work that we’re doing is not necessarily about finding science fraud. It’s about concerns or problems with papers,” Bik said.

These can include problems with the study design, misinterpretation of results, statistical or citation errors, undisclosed conflicts of interest, missing consents or approvals by institutional review boards or institutional animal care and use committees, and duplicated or altered photos or images, Bik said. Errors or intentional fabrications or falsifications may also occur in notes, bar graphs, and tables.

Based on that 2016 analysis and her expertise, Bik estimated that “the real percentage of scientific fraud might be between 5% and 10%” among published papers, which she acknowledged is a “pretty staggering number.”

Bik was joined at the session by Mary Inman, a partner with Constantine Cannon LLP who specializes in representing whistleblowers. Inman explained that Bik is the newest development in the evolution of whistleblowers—and she is rising at a time that is more ripe for fraud than ever before.

“What’s interesting is that the typical whistleblower has always been a whistleblower insider,” said Inman. Like others of her stripe, Bik “doesn’t necessarily work at the university, but is able to look at the data at the peer review [stage], journals and other things, and actually be able to detect research fraud from the outside,” Inman said.

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