

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Regression Toward the Mean: Neither Good nor Evil, Just Unplanned

Sir:

In a recent issue of *Education for Health* you published a letter from Geoff Norman (Norman, 2002) in which he responded to an editorial I had written (Jason, 2001).

Although Norman made some worthy assertions and stated them clearly, as he typically does, he may have also left some impressions that I find worrisome. Yes, as he says, innovation does not always lead to worthy outcomes and returning to prior (common) practices may well be desirable at times. But that's not the central point. The key point, in my view, is that being open to—and trying—new ways of offering education has inherent value and should be routinely pursued. It is the way we continuously learn about learning and teaching. It is the way we respond to changing conditions and understandings. Besides, clinging to any practice for a long time begins to cause it to be regarded as inevitable, even *sacrosanct*, which can interfere with the possibility of any changes being considered, regardless of how desirable they may be. We need look no further than the traditional lecture system for an example of this significant danger.

Innovations, of course, should be pursued on the basis of good evidence, when available, and on careful reasoning always. And, once undertaken, innovations should be subject to continued scrutiny, as should everything we do in health professions education. That is the essential nature of a professional approach to education, which is still all too rare.

To categorize all innovation as necessarily desirable or as necessarily undesirable is to abandon thought in favour of doctrine. I am confident that is not what Norman intended, even if some of his letter may sound that way. The essence of bringing a scientific perspective to the educational process, as those who take education seriously try to do, is to make *everything* subject to question and investigation at all times.

Put another way, an observation by Deepak Chopra about individuals seems to apply equally to educational institutions: 'We don't grow old. When we stop growing we become old.' And, like individuals, institutions can stop growing. They can become feeble and less capable. Reverting to prior, familiar educational practices, not on the basis of research or careful thought, but on

Table 1. Sequential reactions over time to an important new idea

1. Indignant rejection	5. Solid espousal
2. Qualified opposition	6. Proud parenthood
3. Tentative acceptance	7. Dogmatic propagation
4. Cautious adoption	

the basis of an automatic institutional process (implied by the metaphor of Regression Toward the Mean—R2M) can be a manifestation of institutional degradation.

Still, in support of one of Norman's observations ('...we discovered that there is nothing more conservative than a committed evangelist.') I offer Table 1, which I adapted from a note credited to Lade (1965) for an article I wrote for The Network's Newsletter (Jason, 1993). It captures my repeated experience of working with the change process in educational institutions.

When faculty cling automatically to the *status quo*, whether it began as an innovation or has been accepted practice for decades, they are behaving mindlessly, not scientifically. Too often, institutional return to earlier, familiar patterns is also an unplanned, mindless—and therefore undesirable—process. What Norman says happened at McMaster appears to have been the consequence of systematic inquiry, not an automatic, unplanned process. In my view that wasn't R2M.

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