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The courtroom is not a laboratory

The CNRS has learned in the press, to its dismay, of the lawsuit filed by the IHU (university hospitals institute) of Marseille (southeastern France) against Elisabeth Bik and the CNRS researcher Boris Barbour in their capacity as administrators of the website PubPeer.

The CNRS has always expressed serious reservations about the fact that PubPeer users can post anonymous critiques of scientific articles, thus contributing to the excesses of certain social networks for which anonymous insults and accusations are commonplace. The CNRS has made the fight against scientific fraud one of its causes, in particular with the creation of a Mission for Scientific Integrity. However, it condemns anonymous attacks guaranteeing total confidentiality for the authors.

Even so, the CNRS cannot accept the judicialisation of scientific controversy and criticism, which are indispensable when they are constructive and backed by cogent arguments. They are, and must remain, one of the basic principles of research, vital for the advancement of knowledge.

This type of judicialisation can only lead to abuses that are detrimental to the scientific process. It inevitably brings to mind the trial of Galileo, who was brought to justice for daring to claim that the Earth rotated around the Sun and not the other way round. The current health crisis has reminded us all of the critical need for science, which is also necessary for addressing issues such as climate change, the energy transition and the decline of biodiversity. It would be disastrous to imply that scientific truth can be decided in the courts, or in the television studios.

Above all, scientific validation must continue to be based on peer assessment. This is the accepted practice in the international community and it remains an imperative. The courtroom is not a laboratory.

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