

COMMENTARY

Style, substance, Newspeak 'and all that': a commentary on Murray *et al.* (2007) and an open challenge to Goldacre and other 'offended' apologists for EBM

Michael Loughlin PhD

Reader in Applied Philosophy, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, MMU Cheshire, Crewe, Cheshire CW1 5DU, UK

Objectionable objections

The response to the work of Murray *et al.* proves their point more effectively than the arguments contained within their papers. This is not a criticism of their arguments. In their most recent contribution to the debate about evidence-based medicine (EBM) they argue that 'the pro-EBM stance capitalises on the current climate of anti-intellectualism; it equates evidence with practice and truth while dismissing theory as irrelevant' [1].

Since all practice embodies theoretical assumptions of some sort, the refusal to discuss theory is nothing more than the intellectually arbitrary stipulation that one's own assumptions are, henceforth, to be accepted without argument. This arrogant and authoritarian approach is the very antithesis of good science, which requires 'critique' in the sense meant by Kant: not mere 'criticism', but 'a reflection on the conditions of possibility for knowledge and truth' to lay bare the normative 'scaffolding' of practical reasoning [1]. If progress is to be possible, we need practitioners and citizens with the courage and ability to think for themselves. Evidence is not theoretically 'neutral' and cannot be extracted from the context of its discovery without distortion: we do not need the 'synthesised' data of systematic review so much as the sustained practice of 'vigilant analysis and interpretation'. Yet the current climate mitigates against critical thinking and intellectual integrity: 'we no longer learn to think critically. Instead, we are trained as worker-technicians with "transferable skills"; we must be obedient to the logic and ethic of the global market' where work is increasingly 'reduced to a routinised, quantifiable practice driven by utility, best-practices, and reductive performance indicators' [1].

I agree with these points and have made similar claims myself [2–5] as have numerous others over a lengthy period [6–17]. What is particularly interesting is the response of the proponents of EBM to these arguments, especially in the light of the furor provoked by their earlier paper and its references to 'fascism' [18]. Ignoring the substance of their arguments, paying no attention whatsoever to the theoretical context in which the terminology of 'microfascism' was used, respondents jumped on the use of the term to read the authors of the paper as personally smearing Archie Cochrane and his associates – then produced responses that mixed ridicule with extravagant displays of sanctimony in reply to the absurd and 'spectacularly offensive' suggestion that such people were in fact fascists [19].

What interests me is not simply the shameless stupidity of such responses but the undoubted cynicism of those responsible for them. Consider Ben Goldacre's *Guardian* piece [19]. Goldacre knows what it means to set up a 'straw man'. Indeed, he has the (almost admirable) audacity to accuse critics of EBM of responding to a 'straw man', in the sentence immediately preceding a paragraph on Archie Cochrane's war record (with photos!) to rebut all this 'childish' talk of fascism. He must know that he was responding to a caricature of the arguments he supposedly found so offensive, while wilfully ignoring the real thesis concerning EBM that the authors were attempting to articulate. What is more, I think it is possible that he even succeeded in *feeling* offended by the article. But in a very obvious way, his sense of outrage was manufactured, insincere. There is a disturbing sense in which his primary fault was not intellectual, but moral.

This is a good illustration of what Murray *et al.* discuss at the start of their paper, the frequently misused Sartrean idea of 'bad faith'. It would, indeed, be offensive to suppose Goldacre so stupid that he could not, even if he really tried, understand the points his opponents were trying to make. From the outset he took up a stance, assumed a posture – one designed to protect his own assumptions from rational critique and to allow him to strike out at those who were attempting to focus attention upon those precious assumptions. There was nothing *authentic* about his offended reaction: he *seized* the opportunity to experience offence, leaping with relish for the moral high ground he now felt at liberty to assume. Another article in the bag. Another opponent ridiculed. Another pay cheque. Never mind whether or not the authors dismissed actually had anything significant to say. Indeed, Goldacre readily admits to having formed his assessment of their article on the basis of 'looking at the title'; he 'just knows' he can dismiss them because they disagree with EBM, a position he characterizes in such platitudinous terms that anyone opposing it *must* have misunderstood: 'EBM is about using quantitative information, in concert with all other forms of knowledge, sensibly, in a clinical context.' [19] So opponents of EBM oppose the sensible use of quantitative information 'in concert with all other forms of knowledge' and are, as an immediate logical consequence of this definition, silly. What matters for Goldacre is not getting at the truth, even at the basic level of giving an accurate account of one's own position or the position of those one wishes to dismiss. What matters is impressing one's army of supportive 'bloggers' who write in large numbers, sneering at the stupidity of an article while

declaring openly that they have not, and do not intend to, read it. (Ben's short rebuttal piece is enough 'evidence' for them: these could be the excellent 'scientists' of the evidence-based future.) What matters is assuming the mantle of 'science' and 'reason', trading on the rhetorical properties of these terms while leaving their methods behind – stored, presumably, in the Cochrane Library for posterity.

The nature of this exchange provides a riposte to those who claim that the ideas of philosophers like Sartre provide us with no insight into 'real life' questions, that they are 'esoteric' and consequently irrelevant to understanding debates about matters of practical import, like the nature of medical evidence. They are not. As Murray *et al.* show, we cannot do without the concept of bad faith if we are to understand the EBM movement. We have here a group of well-educated and intelligent people. They defend an approach to medical epistemology that has been comprehensively criticized for over a decade (see above) and while their own professed position commits them to a view that all decisions should be based on the most up-to-date research, they ignore the fact that their own epistemological assumptions have been conclusively refuted [3]. They remain apparently oblivious to this inconsistency and continue to publish papers on the latest 'advances' in EBM. Even very simple logical points are ignored: such as the fact that 'evidence' cannot simultaneously refer to something incontestably good and something whose value is not recognized (i.e. *contested*) by many practitioners and commentators [4]. Perhaps such points are considered too simplistic or 'naïve' to deserve a reply. A recent editorial of this journal [5] invited defenders of EBM who treat the nature of their specific concept of 'evidence' as incontestable, or as having now been established beyond all reasonable doubt, to provide details of the precise time and manner of the resolution of the debate: what has been the reply?

From the defenders of EBM there has, of course, been no response to the substantive and detailed critical analyses of their underlying assumptions. Special editions of this journal, as well as specific articles contained therein, have been posted and emailed to authors, officials and the editors of journals who have taken a stridently pro-EBM line, complete with friendly requests to contribute a riposte to critics in the interests of open dialogue. Those invited either do not reply, or they reply simply to indicate that they are 'too busy' or otherwise disinclined to provide any manner of serious academic riposte. Yet they are not too busy to write and publish further pieces in praise of EBM – pieces which ignore all the criticisms in the public domain and proceed as though the assumptions of EBM were indeed incontestable.

Then Holmes *et al.* use the term 'fascism' and manage, suddenly, to get the attention of the EBM community: but only so that its members can cry 'foul!' It is still the case that the *substance* of the critique is ignored, and attention is focused exclusively on its style, in particular its use of 'offensive' terminology. Some EBM apologists may point out that Holmes *et al.* must have known that their use of the term would be provocative, but let us suppose for the sake of argument that is true: what does it show? Clearly it is not a refutation of their substantive thesis, which still awaits a response. If they could predict that defenders of EBM would respond with such extravagant and wholly affected outrage then what does that show about the current intellectual environment? What might have led Holmes *et al.* to be so frustrated that they had to resort to provocation just to get any sort of reaction? And if

somehow the style of the critique of Holmes *et al.* made their piece too 'confusing' for the defenders of EBM, then what was it over all these years that made them unable to understand and reply to all the other critical pieces, including the many making no use of postmodernist terminology and wholly free of the offending term 'fascism'?

Newspeak, ideology and the privatisation of the truth

Such an extremely irrational, anti-intellectual response on the part of a community of intellectuals, explicitly committed to the ideals of science and rationality, surely requires an explanation. Murray *et al.* refer to 'vested interests' that are often 'hidden from sight' and note the influence upon the health sciences of both 'positivism' and a 'technocratic, globalising managerialism' [1]. Referring to Foucault on 'state science', they note that intellectual integrity is increasingly threatened by:

An ethic of industry that informs our ideological state apparatuses, a tangled web that includes Big Pharma; innumerable government lobbies; academia and its research sponsors; the convergence of research and business with multiple 'stakeholders', both public and private; paradigms rewarding the 'bio-entrepreneurship' of biotech companies; service industries from the human genome sciences to multinational pharmaceutical and agribusiness complexes; corporate models from the ground up, including accountability practices and an obsession with quantification; the legal-judicial complex; and the insurance industry [1].

However, 'confusing' this may sound to populist defenders of EBM, I suspect that many who work in health and related areas may have a sense of the connections being made here. Looked at simply from the perspective of their intellectual foundations, it is hard to see what EBM and managerialism have in common. But no-one can accuse Murray *et al.* of making implausible links in this instance. Documents produced by government and senior management about health care practice and organisation frequently treat the links between EBM and 'contemporary management science' as self-evident (Halligan & Donaldson [20] discussed in Loughlin [21]) and references to 'evidence-based management' (Carr [22] discussed in Loughlin [23]) serve to insinuate some manner of theoretical link where clearly none exists. The epistemological foundations of EBM lie in the logical positivist movement, which found its clearest expression in the work of the Vienna Circle philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century [2,3] and gave rise to various forms of 'deductivism' in the philosophy of science [24]. In contrast, the bulk of so-called 'management theory' would not pass as 'science' with respect to any positivist or deductivist criterion [25]. What then is the link?

It becomes apparent only when we stop looking for any sound theoretical basis for the claims of policy makers and their intellectual apologists. Theoretical origins aside, the uses and methods of EBM and so-called management science in the context of real-world health systems are strikingly similar [5]. Both reflect certain interests and serve the purpose of delimiting the role of professionals within formalistic systems for prescribing 'good practice'. Contemporary management theory was specifically designed to control working populations that were seen as getting 'out of

control' [2]. Those in government and senior management who saw the 'incorporation' of this 'science' into public organisations as an 'inspiring' prospect were similarly inspired by EBM (Donaldson [26], Halligan & Donaldson [20] discussed in Loughlin [21]).

Management science, with branches including 'opinion management', 'perception management' and 'culture management', is the science of manipulation. A key strategy of the so-called 'quality revolution' in organisational theory was to define stipulatively the idea of 'organisational quality' in terms of the mechanisms that guarantee control of professional practices by a managerial class [2]. The idea was that, by repeated verbal association (in a plethora of policy documents, training manuals/'handbooks', staff development workshops, etc.) and the steadfast refusal to consider any possible alternative way of thinking about what it might mean to practice well within organisations, management science would establish an 'intellectual culture' in which the association of 'quality' (with all of the obvious rhetorical properties of the term) with 'control by management' would be automatic. This is what is meant by claiming 'ownership' of a term, and the management theorists set out to claim ownership in this way of all persuasive terminology that might be used to evaluate organisational practices, so as to leave no language in terms of which their favoured approach could be meaningfully criticized [2,21]. Thus management theory becomes an 'ideology' in the sense intended by Marx: a system of ideas that functions to provide a rationalisation for the interests of certain groups over others (in this case, guaranteeing them control of organisations) but which serves to obscure those interests (rendering them 'hidden from sight') and coming, over time, to appear self-evident (sheer 'common sense') to naïve participants within the colonized discourse [2,5].

The protagonists of EBM claim ownership of the ideas of 'evidence', 'rationality' and 'science', trading on the rhetorical properties of these terms to make all opposition to their favoured approach to medical practice appear absurd [5]. This is why they cannot engage in dialogue about their own theoretical assumptions: to do so would be to make possible the practice of 'critique' as advocated by Murray *et al.* threatening the status of EBM as the dominant ethos governing practice. If you want to claim ownership of a term then you cannot allow *any* other legitimate uses of it than the ones you specify. The dominance of the conceptions of evidence and good practice inherent within EBM ideology serves the commercial interests of the pharmaceutical companies and the numerous other 'stakeholders' Murray *et al.* identify. Without the need for any 'conspiracy' in the literal sense, the commercial interests of those with the power to fund research come to define the parameters of debate about evidence, and so come to determine what is accepted as the truth within medical discourse: the 'truth' gets privatized [5]. Those who want to advocate or even consider approaches to research and practice that do not reflect the interests of such powerful groups as the pharmaceuticals find that they have been left no language in terms of which to express any criticism of (or even to question) the assumptions of what has become the dominant position. To be opposed to EBM is to be opposed to evidence, reason, science and all things sensible.

When Holmes *et al.* appeal to postmodernist discourse, to find a language not yet colonized by the dominant ethos, in terms of which to articulate their questions about and criticisms of that ethos, they are automatically scolded and sneered at by the Golda-

crs of this world for being 'way out there', on the fringe, crackpots. Does anyone really find it so difficult to understand why the authors 'bang on' (as Goldacre puts it) about Newspeak? Marginalize opposition to the mainstream. Deprive dissenters to official 'common sense' of any terminology they might use to legitimately articulate criticisms. (And do so, remember, by stipulative definition, not argument.) Then when they use language that strikes you as extreme or offensive, use this as conclusive evidence of their absurdity, their 'weirdness', and conclude that they have no right to be taken seriously by self-respecting members of the community they are trying to address. If these guidelines were not part of the manual Winston's bosses at the Ministry of Truth issued to him, then they might well have been.

A challenge to the 'offended'

Let me conclude by issuing a challenge to Goldacre and/or any other EBM apologists who might be reading this. Of course, the chances of them reading it are slim, because they tend only to read material critical of their position if they are looking for source material for another sneering, dismissive, short rebuttal piece. For that reason I will get a colleague to email this piece to Ben Goldacre, with a message declaring it to be full of 'postmodern bullshit' (as one of his admiring bloggers characterized the work of Holmes *et al.*) and as such presenting an ideal opportunity to have another go at 'humanities graduates' who are so petty as to use terms like 'straw man' correctly. If by some chance that strategy has worked and Goldacre is actually reading this, then, hello Ben. Now here is my simple challenge.

Instead of objecting to their attempts to articulate their thesis, ignore any problems you have with its style and actually respond to the substantial points made by Murray *et al.* Look at the arguments, or those of the recent JECP editorial, and see if you can understand why someone else who qualifies for the label 'rational being' can nonetheless fail to agree completely with your own assumptions about the meaning of 'evidence' in medicine and 'rationality' in scientific practice. Consider, just for a moment, the *possibility* that someone might disagree with you without, thereby, qualifying as either stupid or insane. Do an old-fashioned exercise in analysis: try to identify the structure of the arguments you think wrong, explaining the premises, the conclusions and the relationship between them, then say *specifically* which part of the argument is wrong and why. Then we can have something we all might recognize as a rational discussion. If you want to debate the substantive points face to face then we can certainly arrange something. I will go absolutely anywhere for a good argument, and I know many others who feel the same way. But let us have a debate about the key point at issue.

Let me state that point in language so simple that even the most determined EBM apologist will find it hard to misread. The key issue between such apologists, on the one hand, and Murray and his associates on the other is not postmodernism. It is EBM. By using modes of analysis derived from certain postmodernist thinkers, Murray *et al.* are not committed to defending everything any thinker one might label 'postmodernist' has ever said. Nor are they committed to supporting the specific statements from Deleuze and Guattari cited by Goldacre [19] (purely for effect: he *of course* attempts no analysis of them) in his article. Similarly, they need not be in broad agreement with (let us say) Sartre's politics in

order to make good use of his concept of bad faith in their analysis of the thinking of adherents to EBM. They might wish to defend the specific statements cited by Goldacre, just as they might (for all I know) be in broad agreement with Sartre's politics. The point is, they are not logically committed to defending these points in order for their analysis of the EBM debate to stand – any more than a maths teacher using a Cartesian plane to demonstrate a point is logically committed to defending every aspect of the Cartesian world picture (including, for instance, mind-body dualism).

I am not a postmodernist – in fact, I have published criticisms of postmodernist authors elsewhere [2,21,25]. Yet on reading the work of Murray *et al.* I find myself fundamentally in agreement with the substantive points they make. What is more, I find their use of Deleuze and Guattari illuminating in the context of the EBM debate [18] and their subsequent use of Sartre and Foucault particularly illuminating [1]. Unlike Goldacre, who is proud that he 'only knows about science and computers', and treats as patently hilarious the idea that such 'postmodernist intellectuals' as Holmes *et al.* might be 'more intelligent' than he is, I am one of those 'humanities graduates' he disparages, who has still not arrived at the conclusion that he has absolutely nothing to learn from others. What is more, I actually seem to enjoy being taught something by thinkers coming from alternative theoretical backgrounds to my own. That this characteristic makes me 'weird' in the academic world ought to strike us as a serious problem – not for me, but for the academic world and the future of intellectual exchange. It is, however, worth noting that Murray *et al.* arrive at conclusions about EBM that bear significant points of comparison with the conclusions of other independent critics who come from radically different intellectual starting points. If there is such a thing as the truth about EBM, this just might give us some sort of clue as to the nature of that truth.

Goldacre ends his article with the question 'what did you do over the summer?' In context (I take it) this is meant to shame Holmes *et al.* for failing to spend their summer fighting fascists in the style of the admirable Cochrane. (I have no idea what Goldacre's 'evidence base' might be for his conclusions about how Holmes *et al.* spend their summers. Perhaps he has access to a database of 'known postmodernists' collating information enabling reliable statistical prediction within a range of possible pastimes.) Let me here hypothesize that one thing Goldacre will not do this summer, nor at any other time, is even attempt to understand the substantive arguments against EBM, let alone respond in an appropriately civil and detailed manner to those arguments. He will be 'too busy' to take up my challenge and join me or any other critic of EBM in a face-to-face debate, even though I have said I will meet him anywhere, at a time of his convenience. He will always have 'better things' to do.

If I am right, will that count as 'evidence' in support of the thesis of Murray *et al.* that Goldacre and his ilk are guilty of bad faith – that they are, in fact, concerned only with appropriating the language of science and reasoned debate, but care nothing for actually engaging in reasoned debate about the proper conduct of science? Will that prove that their approach to argument is indeed fascistic in precisely the sense explained in the paper by Holmes *et al.*? To such apologists, absolutely nothing can count as evidence against their cherished assumptions, so those of us that they cannot label absurd or marginal or deviant will just have to go on

being ignored. The rest of us should congratulate Holmes *et al.*: were I to do so by saying 'at least you got the bastards' attention for a while!' then maybe I too could enjoy a few moments of being noticed, if only to provoke a sanctimonious debate within the EBM community on the legitimacy of swearing in an academic publication.

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