

French scientist tries to silence whistle-blower over discredited COVID-19 hydroxychloroquine claims

Samuel Tissot
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French microbiologist Dr. Didier Raoult, who published a now-discredited paper in March 2020 claiming that hydroxychloroquine was effective at treating COVID-19, has threatened legal action against scientists criticizing his research. These include Elizabeth Bik, the whistleblower who first exposed methodological inconsistencies in Raoult's research, and Boris Barbour, who runs the not-for-profit website *Pubpeer* allowing scientists to review each other's work.

On May 18, an open letter supporting Bik against Raoult's attack titled "Scientists stand up to protect academic whistleblowers and post-publication peer review" was published. It has since been signed by over 1,000 scientists across the globe, working across multiple disciplines.

Elizabeth Bik is a microbiologist and research integrity specialist whose work investigating academic misconduct has led to more than 170 paper retractions and exposed more than 4,000 cases of duplication, data manipulation, plagiarism, and ethical breaches. On March 24, 2020, Bik published a blog post that exposed a number of inconsistencies with Raoult's March 17 paper, which claimed treatment with the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine significantly increased the chance of survival for patients with severe cases of COVID-19.

Bik raised a number of methodological concerns within Raoult's study. This included the removal of one subject who had died and two who had become too ill to receive treatment during the study from his results, raising suspicions that Raoult cherry-picked data to support the finding that the drug was effective against COVID-19. Bik also found that the study began on March 5, one day before it received official clearance from the French Ethics Committee on March 6, and that Raoult's paper was peer-reviewed in just 24 hours, a process that usually

takes weeks. Bik also unearthed an undeclared conflict of interest: one of paper's co-authors, J. M. Rolain, was the editor-in-chief of the journal to which it was rapidly accepted.

Bik then began reviewing Raoult's other work and ultimately flagged concerns with 62 more of Raoult's papers. This led to an angry response from Raoult and his colleagues.

Raoult has denounced Bik on Twitter as a "witch-hunter," "nutcase," and "failed researcher," while his colleague Eric Chabrière described her as a "dung-beetle." Raoult later accused Bik of trying to blackmail him without any evidence and denounced her on national television. He also took the thuggish decision to publish Bik's personal address to his followers on Twitter.

On April 29, Raoult's lawyers sent a letter to *Nature* claiming they have filed a lawsuit against Bik, accusing her "of aggravated moral harassment, attempted blackmail and attempted extortion." Bik is yet to receive any notification of legal action, however. It is unclear whether Raoult and his lawyers intend to continue the case, or if the letter was only an attempt to intimidate Bik into self-censorship with the threat of legal action.

Bik maintains her innocence and has refused to withdraw her criticisms despite these attacks. She responded to Raoult's action by asking, "Why doesn't he show me proof that I am wrong? I would be happy to accept that," adding, "Science should be discussed in the scientific arena, not the legal one."

Didier Raoult is a controversial figure within scientific circles. While his groundbreaking research has led to the discovery of hundreds of new types of viruses, he has complained of the "dictatorship of the methodologists" and dismissed the importance of randomized trials for objective experimentation. He is currently under

investigation following a complaint last November by a group representing 500 specialists of France's Infectious Diseases society, accusing him of breaking nine rules of the doctors' code of ethics.

In France, he won popular sympathy early in the pandemic by insisting that people be treated, commendably providing free tests at his institute for anyone that showed up. At that time, he rejected a "herd immunity" policy of letting coronavirus spread unchecked and told the government that a firm test-and-trace strategy was essential to eliminate the virus. President Emmanuel Macron responded to Raoult's rising influence and profile in the media by bringing him on as a scientific advisor.

Unfortunately, Raoult increasingly tailored his statements to what was politically acceptable to Macron. In May 2020, he stated that the virus was naturally coming to an end and that "nowhere do we see a second wave." Despite mounting evidence schools were drivers of the pandemic, Raoult advised Macron that children are not significant spreaders of the virus, paving the way for the premature reopening of schools on May 11, 2020.

In December 2020, Raoult dismissed COVID-19 vaccines, which had proven highly effective in clinical trials, as "science fiction and, above all, as publicity." He made a right-wing comment opposing mandatory vaccination, saying: "If we played around with making vaccines mandatory, there would be a revolution. Luckily we haven't done that." In fact, universal vaccination against the virus is a critical component of an international public health policy to halt the pandemic.

Raoult's harassment of Bik has been denounced by scientists around the world. An open letter defending Bik states that Raoult's "strategy of harassments and threats is creating a chilling effect for whistleblowers and for scholarly criticism more generally."

Lonni Besançon, a co-author of the open letter and computer scientist in Australia, told *Nature*, "Investigating someone's research is definitely not harassment. This is a scientific question, this should not fall onto the legal system to figure out." A spokesperson for Pubpeer, the other target of Raoult's threatened lawsuit, stated: "A successful legal action could have a chilling effect on post-publication peer review."

Bik's exposure of Raoult and his bullying response raise important scientific and political issues regarding scientific integrity.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Bik was joined by a host of other scientists expressing concern over research advocating the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat

COVID-19. This included Paul Garner, the editor of the Cochrane Infectious Disease Group, who told the *BMJ* (formerly, *British Medical Journal*) that, "they [hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine] could do harm" and "there is absolutely no evidence that chloroquine is effective in people infected with the coronavirus."

Nevertheless, after the first lockdowns in the spring of 2020, Raoult's research was endorsed by capitalist politicians seeking to promote all and any "cures," regardless of their efficacy, in order to impose a quick end to lockdowns and return to work to boost corporate profits. Then-US president Donald Trump hailed Raoult's work as "very good" and hydroxychloroquine treatment of COVID-19 as "the biggest game changer in the history of medicine." The drug was also promoted by Brazil's fascist president, Jair Bolsonaro.

The adoption of "herd immunity" policies that have led to the deaths of millions have relied in no small part on constant offensives by state officials to mislead the public about scientific data. This underscores the critical importance of free scientific discussion, unhampered by any threats of legal action or violence in the pursuit of the truth.

In France, which will surpass 110,000 deaths by the end of the week, Macron has declared war on scientists, repeatedly ignoring their calls for lockdown and denouncing their "incessant tracking of errors." Macron's adviser Stéphane Séjourné even went as far to denounce the "uncontrolled and suffocating interventions of scientists" in January of this year. The targeting of scientists like Bik for pursuing scientific investigation of existing research only worsens this toxic atmosphere and hampers the fight to inform the public about the coronavirus.



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