



# Science and Technology Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP, Chair

Richard Horton  
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7<sup>th</sup> March 2019

*Dear Richard Horton,*

## **Investigation and potential retraction of research published in the Lancet**

Thank you for your letter dated 25 January.

I shared your response with Dr Wilmshurst, and I enclose his assessment of it for your reference. You will also be aware that this topic was the subject of Newsnight reports on Tuesday 26 February and Thursday 28 February, which raised some important questions about the Lancet's position on this matter.

I am particularly concerned by three aspects of your letter:

- You state that you asked the host institution to investigate the allegations regarding Lancet 2008;372:2023–30 and Lancet 2014;383:238–44, and that they reported to you that “all ethical requirements for the clinical aspects of the work have been appropriately fulfilled”. I am not convinced that this statement deals with the substance of Dr Wilmshurst's concern that the information provided in the papers is inaccurate.
- Meanwhile, I have been told that the Director of the Hospital Clinic in Barcelona wrote to the Lancet in May 2018 to highlight problems with the 2008 paper. This does not seem to be consistent with the suggestion that the host institution has investigated but no action is required.
- You also state that Dr Wilmshurst has been informed of the conclusion of the institution's report. He tells me that he has not been provided with this, and has written to you separately on this point.

Your response does not give me any confidence that this issue is being handled appropriately, or with sufficient urgency. More broadly it underlines the Science and Technology Committee's recommendation that a new national committee on research integrity is needed to improve public confidence in this area.



The risk to human health of mis-reported patient outcomes surely means that there is a need for the Lancet to be proactive on this issue. While it may be tempting to pass all responsibility back to the host institution, I would have thought that you owe a duty to the readers of the Lancet to ensure that problems such as this are actively pursued.

The Lancet has faced criticism in the past about failure to retract unreliable research in a timely manner. Lives are genuinely at risk if inaccurate research is allowed to persist in the published record without at least a 'statement of concern' from the publisher.

I would be grateful if you could review your response in light of the above and provide a response by Wednesday 20 March.

I am copying this letter to Dr Sarah Wollaston, Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Yours sincerely,

**Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP**  
*Chair, Science & Technology Committee*

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