Bartleby, the Scrivener

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In the tale Bartleby¹, Herman Melville portrays a bitter, covert satire of American business success. A lawyer hires a scrivener, Bartleby. At first, Bartleby does an extraordinary quantity of writing, yielding the impression of a remarkable achievement for the lawyer's office. Yet, later he kindly denies any work not strictly related to copying: 'I would prefer not to'. The tale articulates the struggle between the lawyer and Bartleby and ends with the firing and subsequent imprisonment of Bartleby (because of his failure to leave the office). The lawyer then learns that Bartleby had once been a clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington (a metaphor for all messages that never reach an audience, such as rejected manuscripts?).

A current view of the scientific success in academic medicine lends itself to a similar satire and Bartleby

may become a symbol for the resistance to this trend. Every physician, in fact, is now impressed with the current proliferation of medical meetings and symposia. The phenomenon crosses all Western Europe and North America and is heavily supported, if not guided, by the pharmaceutical industry that often decides the topics and selects at least part of the speakers. If you are a medical researcher and a meeting in your specific area of interest (aside from the ordinary societies meetings) takes place, you need to be there. To demonstrate your firm competence as a speaker or discussant and to avoid 'losing' the cutting edge of research. The problem is that the meetings are too many and conflicting dates may occur, creating difficult dilemmas, with resulting anxiety and grievances. Another issue may concern the fact that one has also to work (teach,

do research, take care of patients). Yet, this is not universal, fortunately, and there are ever present academic physicians who do not seem to be affected by this problem and are able to provide reassuring continuity (the same talk, the same slides) from one meeting to another. When I was a research fellow in the United States, after reading a review article that lacked references to actual scientific works, I complained to a seasoned researcher. 'You should not blame the author of that article' he said to me with a smile. 'It is not his fault. He is too busy giving talks around the country and cannot have time for reading the literature.' I was very amused by what I then judged to be a joke.

Who is responsible for all this meetings rush? Many colleagues of mine (I am a psychiatrist) would blame the physicians' mothers.

Melville H: Bartleby; in Billy Budd and Other Tales. New York, New American Library 1961. I am sure that interesting family histories may be ascertained in some cases, yet psychiatrists, who should have worked out their rearing problems, are not immune for this phenomenon and are indeed leaders in this meetings rush. May be there is another explanation: we are all trapped in a vicious circle that is hard to break. Your 'objective' success as a researcher depends on the number of quotations your

papers achieve (yet who established this?); your 'subjective' success, however, also depends on the number of invitations you get. And the more you make yourself known at meetings, the more likely your papers are to be quoted (has this correlation been proven?).

'Cui prodest?' is perhaps a better question, who benefits from all these meetings and symposia? May be the speakers, may be the listeners.

Certainly the pharmaceutical industry that has now sensational ways of promoting its products (is it, however, really cost effective?). Definitely, not science or patients. How can we break this vicious circle? Next time we are invited to a meeting (all expenses paid), let's think of Bartleby for a second. He would kindly reply 'I would prefer not to' and continue his work.

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Editorial