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Asking for your help regarding the due process of investigations of ethical issues by Harvard Medical School

Yuntian Deng <[REDACTED]@seas.harvard.edu>

Fri, Apr 2, 2021 at 5:48 PM

To: International Scholars Working Group HGSU-UAW Local 5118 <[REDACTED]@googlegroups.com>,
[REDACTED]@gmail.com

Cc: "Jin, Martin" <[REDACTED]@g.harvard.edu>

Dear fellow students and colleagues,

My name is Yuntian Deng. I am a G4 student in SEAS, and also a union member. I am writing on behalf of 68 Harvard students/alumni to ask for your help regarding the lack of transparency of an investigation conducted by the Harvard Medical School (HMS) per our request.

It has been a frustratingly long and complicated process (we have been fighting for **9 months**), so I want to start from the beginning and describe the chain of events that led us to call for more help. In Jun 2020, an article from HMS went viral on social media (tweeted by Donald Trump) and is widely covered by media. The article, titled "[Analysis of hospital traffic and search engine data in Wuhan China indicates early disease activity in the Fall of 2019](#)", analyzed the Chinese search engine data and indicated that COVID-19 started in China in "late summer and early fall 2019". This article [was cited by the press](#) even before the preprint became public with the corresponding author (an HMS professor) being interviewed. I believe any reasonable human being can see what social impact this paper would have, and how it would incite hatred against Chinese, and by extension, the broad AAPI community.

As members of the Harvard community, we respect academic freedom and we are willing to accept hard truths uncovered by impartial scientific investigations. However, after looking at **the way through which the authors drew this conclusion**, we were infuriated by their use of [data dredging](#) (a technique used by some pharmaceutical companies to show that a drug is effective by performing multiple statistical tests until the desired conclusion is drawn, such as drug X is effective for disease Y). The usage of data dredging is evidenced by two facts: first, the authors only used a keyword "diarrhea" which ranks lowest on the [CDC list of symptoms of COVID-19](#); second, the authors used an uncommon translation of "diarrhea" (腹泻的症状) instead of the common translation (腹泻) (which is also what's produced by Google Translate, and you guessed it, using the common translation would lead to a different conclusion). While the use of data dredging by pharmaceutical companies is most likely driven by profit, then what's the motivation/intention behind this article?

On Jun 15, 2020, we sent our concerns (forwarded below) to HMS and got no reply. On Jul 13, we asked Dean Shiela Thomas to help us, and we sent another email on Jul 14, and that same day, Jennifer Ryan, on behalf of HMS and Boston Children's Hospital, promised to investigate. However, we didn't hear back from them after half a year, so we sent Jennifer Ryan another email on Jan 25, 2021, and there's still no response. On Mar 18, we sent them an email again, this time cc'ing the diversity offices at Harvard and SEAS, and we finally got back a reply on Apr 1 (you might start to see a pattern here, without involving other parties, they just would not reply):

===== Start Quote

Thank you again for bringing forward your concerns and those of your fellow Harvard students about the article "Analysis of hospital traffic and search engine data in Wuhan China indicates early disease activity in the Fall of 2019."

We affirm our commitment to academic freedom, which is fundamental to the role of research institutions. We believe that the article is a scientific one for the academic community to consider as part of the scientific discourse. Additionally, one of the study's co-authors has a primary appointment at Boston Children's Hospital, which has since reviewed the research and has no concerns under its institutional policies.

Please know that Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital are committed to diversity and inclusiveness and to ensuring that all members of our community feel safe and welcome. As conveyed by Dean George Q. Daley as well as former CEO Sandra Fenwick and current CEO Kevin Churchwell in recent weeks, we stand with the Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities and all who are targets of racism and of racist acts.

Thank you again for bringing your concerns to our attention.

===== End Quote

As you can see from the length of their reply, their arrogance and lack of transparency are astonishing. We have clearly brought up **four points of concerns** (see the forwarded email and the attachment), yet their reply is simply "We **believe that** the article is a scientific one for the academic community to consider as part of the scientific discourse", without addressing ANY of our ethical and scientific concerns at all. Besides, none of us who drafted the open letter were involved in their investigation process (if any), and we didn't even get a chance to observe their meetings (if any), let alone adding our perspectives. This is definitely a one-way conversation, and they just want to force their conclusions down our throat.

We have exhausted all possible means to have a two-way conversation and to make our voices heard (I fear that I would have already graduated the next time they reply to my email), and I am writing this letter to you in the hope of enlisting more help to ask HMS to disclose their investigation process, and answer our following questions:

1. Refute our concerns in the attachment scientific_issues.docx in our original email (Jun 15, 2020) point-by-point;
2. Disclose what is the investigation process, how many meetings they had and at what time, why did it take 9 months since our first email;
3. Disclose what protocols are being followed for drawing such a conclusion;
4. Answer whether the investigation committee is representative and diverse;
5. Disclose what evidence is being examined and what hypotheses are made and invalidated, is it even possible to draw a conclusion the other way;
6. Answer how are conflicts of interest avoided and fairness ensured in their investigation without any student observer;
7. Answer if they took into account any potential social impact and ethical considerations in their investigation.

We want to reiterate that we are **not against their conclusions**, but we are deeply **concerned about their due process** for reaching such a conclusion. We just hope to get an **open, transparent, and fair investigation**, and we are willing to fight to the end to achieve that.

Thanks for your patience!

Best,
Yuntian

Begin forwarded message:

From: "Deng, Yuntian" <[REDACTED]@g.harvard.edu>

Subject: Concerns about an article from HMS and Boston Children's Hospital (from 68 Harvard students)

Date: June 15, 2020 at 1:57:27 PM EDT

To: [REDACTED]@hms.harvard.edu, [REDACTED]@childrens.harvard.edu, [REDACTED]@hms.harvard.edu,
[REDACTED]@childrens.harvard.edu, [REDACTED]@childrens.harvard.edu, [REDACTED]@childrens.harvard.edu,
[REDACTED]@childrens.harvard.edu, [REDACTED]@childrens.harvard.edu, [REDACTED]@hms.harvard.edu,
[REDACTED]@hms.harvard.edu, [REDACTED]@childrens.harvard.edu

Cc: GSAS Dean Emma Dench <[REDACTED]@fas.harvard.edu>, "Thomas, Sheila" <[REDACTED]@fas.harvard.edu>,
[REDACTED]@fas.harvard.edu, Martin Jin <[REDACTED]@g.harvard.edu>, [REDACTED]@g.harvard.edu

Dear Dean Daley, Ms. Fenwick, Dean Brodnicki, Dr. Churchwell, Dr. Cervini, Dr. Williams, Dr. Houman, Dr. Kohane, Dr. Ryan and Dr. Brownstein,

Hope this email finds you well.

As Chinese students studying at or graduated from Harvard, we are writing to convey our concerns about a recent article from Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital "Analysis of hospital traffic and search engine data in Wuhan China indicates early disease activity in the Fall of 2019" (Harvard Dash: [Analysis of hospital traffic and search engine data in Wuhan China indicates early disease activity in the Fall of](#)

2019), and request that Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital investigate the case and potentially retract this article.

Our concerns are:

1. The conclusion in this article is not a scientific one drawn from rigorous data sampling and analysis and potentially involves [data dredging](#). A group of us with statistics and data science backgrounds have carefully studied this article and found many problems in its methodology, sampling, and analysis. You may find more detailed reasonings in the **attachment**.
2. The not-peer-reviewed article has been widely picked up [by the media](#) (even before the preprint was published), and circulated in social media (including [President Trump's twitter](#)). The inconclusive or unscientific statement in the title and abstract has been cited as a fact and used to vilify China, provoking hatred against Chinese, especially Chinese students in the US. This not only hurts the feeling of Chinese students at Harvard, but also denigrates Harvard's reputation as an institution that is known for her research integrity.

As members of the Harvard community, we were very concerned to see such a misleading paper affiliated with Harvard. We respect scientific investigations and understand that some hard truths might be disturbing, but to the best of our judgment, this article is misleading to the public. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the Chinese and Asian community in the US has been under continuous racial and xenophobic discrimination, and there is an increasing number of reported racism attacks against Asians despite many collaboration commitments ([Harvard Gazette](#)). We are deeply concerned that the situation is exacerbated by this article, published and endorsed by a prestigious institute like Harvard Medical School.

We sincerely hope that you will consider our concerns, and request the Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital to investigate the case. We believe that HMS has the responsibility to maintain research integrity among faculty members. The title of Harvard Medical School lends substantial credibility to this paper despite its substandard analysis. It is in the interest of the school and the wider Harvard community to maintain high academic standards to protect Harvard's academic reputation.

Sincerely,

Martin Jin (corresponding), SEAS rising G4 PhD ([\[REDACTED\]@g.harvard.edu](#))
 Yuntian Deng (corresponding), SEAS rising G4 PhD ([\[REDACTED\]@g.harvard.edu](#))
 Jiayu Yao, SEAS rising G4 PhD
 Yaowei Li, SEAS rising G3 PhD
 Joe Zhou, SEAS PhD
 Lucy Yip, GSD grad'20
 Molei Liu, Biostatistics rising G4 PhD ([\[REDACTED\]@g.harvard.edu](#))
 Xi Chen, GSD rising G3 master ([\[REDACTED\]@gsd.harvard.edu](#))
 Yuchen Zheng, GSD
 Ji Hua, HSPH ([\[REDACTED\]@mail.harvard.edu](#))
 Tianyu Su, MIT DUSP MCP
 Maoran Sun, GSD MAUD
 Zhou Xu, GSD Master of Architecture in Urban Design
 Weiyi Cao, GSD Master in Design Studies
 Boya Guo, GSD G3 Doctor of Design
 Yinru Long, HGSE M.Ed
 Diana Guo, GSD rising G3 master
 Yujia Wang, GSD MLA
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 Edward Wang, MIT EECS PhD
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 Kai Xu, rising G3 Math PhD
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 Ping Gao, Physics PhD 2019 Alumni
 Donglai Wei, SEAS post-doc
 Min Wu, rising G4 SEAS PhD
 Jiawei Dou, GSD MAUD 20'
 Chenhao Ma, GSD MAUD 21'
 Xin Chen, GSD MDes 2018
 Sufeng Xiao, GSD MLA 21'
 Jing Shi, GSAS PhD, 20'
 Rachel Zoll, rising G2 SEAS PhD
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 Renjing Xu, SEAS rising G5
 Wei Sun, Economics Department 2017'
 Shuran Zheng, SEAS rising G4 PhD
 Xiao Wu, G4 Biostatistics PhD
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 Meng Wang, HSPH SM 19'
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 Yunqi Yang, HSPH SM 19'
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 He Sun, SEAS PhD
 Zhongpeng Sun, CCB rising G2 PhD
 Pak Wah Chan, EPS rising G6 PhD
 Xiaochuan Dai, GSAS CCB PhD 2015 Alumni
 Xinyi Li, HGSE M. Ed
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 Xinchun Duan, HMS MS 21'
 Dongming Huang, Statistics PhD 2020 Alumni
 Ruoran Li, HSPH ScD 2020 Alumni [REDACTED]@mail.harvard.edu
 And more anonymous supporters

2 attachments



scientific_issues.docx

15K



open_letter.docx

18K