Misleading information regarding neurosurgical practice in Cairo, Egypt

TO THE EDITOR: We would like to take this opportunity to voice our deepest concerns regarding some misleading information contained in one of the articles published in your esteemed journal about our university hospitals and the entire healthcare system in Greater Cairo, a bustling metropolis of more than 20 million inhabitants. The article by Waheed et al.¹ (Waheed G, Soliman MAR, Ali AM, et al. Spontaneous spondylodiscitis: review, incidence, management, and clinical outcome in 44 patients. Neurosurg Focus. 2019;46[1]:E10) falsely claims All patients were treated between January 2012 and October 2017 in the neurosurgery department at Cairo University Hospitals, which is the biggest referral tertiary care center in Egypt. Cairo University Hospitals are public hospitals whose referral area has a population of nearly 20.5 million. Note that there is only one other smaller university hospital with a neurosurgery department and that the other medical departments do not treat spine infections [emphasis added]. However, there is a private sector in Egypt that treats patients who can afford surgical expenses.

In fact, there are at least five academic neurosurgical departments, covering the clinical load in 12 major hospitals, namely, Cairo University, Ain Shams University, Al-Azhar University for men, Al-Azhar University for women, and the Military Medical Academy. Additionally, there are many neurosurgical divisions in the Ministry of Health hospitals including large, specialized hospitals. All these departments and hospitals offer their services free of charge to patients from Cairo and from outside Cairo under the umbrella of national health insurance.

Let us just put this into perspective. The Department of Neurosurgery at Ain Shams University, the so-called “other smaller” university, was founded in 1956 and grew to be a nationally and internationally recognized neurosurgical care provider. We currently have 62 active attending neurosurgeons covering three main university hospitals, as well as other affiliated hospitals. We have 23 residents in training covering postgraduate years 1–7. At Demerdash Hospital alone, we have four dedicated neurosurgery operating rooms, and last year we performed 1611 neurosurgical procedures. This is just one of three main hospitals.

Our concern stems not from institutional pride but from our strong belief in the importance of integrity and honesty in scientific publication. Albert Einstein once said, “Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted in important affairs.”²,³ The misinformation in the aforementioned article may not relate to its internal validity, and thus, it can be easily overlooked by your respected peer-review process. However, it undoubtedly magnifies its impact on the audience by creating a sense of sympathy for the service provider/author that transcends science. Indeed, this sympathy is sometimes justified and even appreciated because of the unique struggles faced by healthcare providers in developing countries. But if this “uniqueness” is based on a false claim that belittles other people’s services, then the whole construct is just designed to promote an article beyond its scientific merits.

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References

Disclosures
The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Response
We are so thankful for the opportunity to respond to the letter by Dr. Al-Abyad and Dr. Ibrahim to address their concerns regarding denigrating our sister universities in Cairo, Egypt, in our study. All of the faculty neurosurgeons at Cairo University Hospitals respect all their colleagues from other universities in Cairo and all over Egypt. However, when the authors mentioned that Cairo
University Hospitals is the largest university hospital in the greater Cairo area, they meant it is the largest from the perspective of the number of beds. Cairo University Hospitals contain more than 5200 beds, representing the largest medical complex in the Middle East and one of the largest in the world. The neurosurgery department at Cairo University Hospitals serves 11 hospitals (Al Manial Bahari, Al Manial Kibli, Psychiatry, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Internal Medicine, Emergency, Abu El-Reesh El-Mounira Children, Abu El-Reesh Japanese Children, Students, Kasr-Al-Aini New Teaching, and Al Manial Specialized Hospital). Excluding the Kasr-Al-Aini New Teaching and Al Manial Specialized Hospital, Cairo University Hospitals performed 5101 neurosurgical procedures in 2019 (the year of the study’s publication). The neurosurgery department includes 130 active neurosurgery faculty members, excluding emeritus professors. In the second half of the quoted sentence, “the other medical departments do not treat spine infections,” we meant that the nonsurgical departments such as the internal medicine department do not treat spine infection patients. Lastly, the authors mentioned that we added this sentence in our article to create a sense of sympathy toward our study. At Cairo University, we do not have this mindset, as our faculty of medicine is ranked in the top 250 universities from all over the world in the latest QS Top Universities ranking. The QS Top Universities ranking depends mainly on the university’s research productivity and quality and its main indicators are the university’s academic reputation, research citation per paper, h-index, and international research network.

Again, we extend our sincere apologies to our colleagues for this misunderstanding, and we emphasize that all faculty neurosurgeons at Cairo University Hospitals respect their colleague neurosurgeons from all over Egypt and the sentence that raised their concerns does not affect the methodology of the study in any form.

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