

# The WWW. Weird World of Wikipedia

By Martin J. Walker  
February 2006

*With this in mind, most people dealing with this issue, attempt to mitigate the problem by understanding that all knowledge is 'situated' knowledge, and that all judgements come from a particular standpoint. This means that it is understood that no one can claim to be 100% 'neutral' or 'objective', and that there are always power struggles involved when someone claims to be 'objective' (especially whilst engaging in partisan behaviour).*

Angela Kennedy & Jane Bryant, The One Click Group to  
Jimmy Wales.  
17 November 2005.

[http://www.theoneclickgroup.co.uk/documents/ME-CFS\\_docs/More%20Wikipedia%20On%20Wessely.doc](http://www.theoneclickgroup.co.uk/documents/ME-CFS_docs/More%20Wikipedia%20On%20Wessely.doc)

*One Click seems to me to be a bunch of paranoid zealots. And I will state again that before I tried to tone down the shit they put on the Wessely page I had never heard of them or Simon Wessely.*

Just Z G, you know? [T]/[C] AfD? 15:46,  
19 December 2005

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely)

A conservative estimate of the number of adults and children suffering from ME suggests that there are around 250,000 in the UK, yet it is rarely diagnosed by the medical profession, is fleetingly mentioned in government research funding documents, is seldom accepted by medical research workers, and is almost never admitted to by insurance companies.

Since 1986, while gathering around him an entourage of like minded disciples which has become known as the Wessely

School, Professor Simon Wessely, has almost single-handedly been responsible for the strategy of a moratorium on the investigation of ME as an illness with a physically neurological cause. Professor Wessely is a psychiatrist, and for nearly twenty years he has promulgated the idea that ME and the broader groupings of chronic fatigue illnesses (CFS) are the product of 'false illness beliefs', mental aberrations, which can be diagnosed and treated with psychiatric based therapies and anti-depressants.

Professor Wessely carries out research mainly in the London-based Institute of Psychiatry which is situated in King's College teaching hospital. He is a member of numerous research organisations and advisory groups, and is advisor to the British Armed Services. While his membership of an 'official' web of research organisations tell us a lot about his work, added substance to his views is to be found in his more informal and less renowned associations with a number of minority-view groups set up by, or aligned with US and British 'quackbuster' organisations.

Just before Christmas 2005, the Wikipedia, an electronic and sometimes publicly edited encyclopaedia, was host to a small, anonymous entry about Professor Wessely. The entry appeared to have originated with someone opposed to Wessely's psychiatric view of ME. On seeing this entry, Jane Bryant of the One Click (OC) campaign substituted a longer text, which contained not just biographical facts but a broader description of Wessely's role in the politics of ME.

When this longer text was seen by the Wikipedia 'edit police' who cruise the pages seeking 'vandalism' and 'skewed' edits, it was immediately considered to break most of Wikipedia's self serving rules. On writing to the owner and founder of Wikipedia, 'Jimbo' Wales, in an attempt to put their case, the OC campaign received a personal communication from him.

Although Wales, aimed at a slight up-beat and reconciliatory tone in his e-mail, the text was scattered with veiled insults. He accused One Click participants of 'behavioural problems', while stating that OC organisers had lied and purposefully made libellous statements in their posted piece on Wessely. He made clear even at this early stage of the exchange that Wikipedia would from then on act on the basis that 'anything from your site (will be treated) with extreme scepticism.' Jimbo Wales, ended his e-mail with an exhortation for everyone to settle differences and unit in the spirit of Wikichristmas.

When, however, OC answered Jimbo with a rebuttal of his argument in favour of an orthodox objectivity and neutrality - 'we are not going to be advocates for or against either side in this dispute' - the debate entered another level.

It seems possible that Professor Wessely, having been alerted to his Wikipedia entry began to liaise with Wikipedia and the business of drafting a Soviet-style biographical text about him was given to the indulgently named *Just Zis Guy, you know?* (Clearly I have no intention of using this onanistic sobriquet in this essay and so will refer to him as ZG)

There ensued an argument, about One Click's contribution to the Wessely entry, which though handled with cool clear minded determination by OC, degenerated into bad language and scatological rebukes from male Wikipedians,.

*G, my warmest compliments & wikhug for putting up with the faecal matter of One Click.*

JFW T@lk 20.51, 19 December 2005

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely)

## **Air Brushing Out the Context**

I do not want to get embroiled in any of the detailed arguments about the meaning of concepts and words, which became to some degree the subject of this row. What seems more important is the way in which Wikipedia, a cult-like project employing its own acronymic language, evidently believed that it could re-create, define and separate the experience and perception of Professor Wessely held by thousands of ME/CFS patients from any biographical account of the man himself.

*I have made the forked version live. As outside editors are converging on the fork after an awareness campaign by One Click I see no point in hiding it further. Criticisms of hagiography are likely to persist from those people who feel Wessely's research has caused "mental health" stigma of chronic fatigue syndrome, and there will be a lot of reverts until the partisans learn the importance of WP:NPOV, WP:NOR and WP:CITE.*

(Jfdwolff)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely)

The quote above shows not only the insider argot of the group, but also their seeming incapacity to understand what the

grounds for opposition were from OC. One Click does not, for instance, complain about the stigma of a 'mental health' diagnosis; rather, it objects strongly to Wessely's psychiatric diagnosis forming the basis for treatment modalities when no biophysical research has been carried out.

Nor does OC, generally speaking, refer solely to chronic fatigue syndrome, which is an all embracing Wessely nomenclature which has taken root in Britain and the US after Wessely 'did away' with ME. One of the planks of the OC campaign has been the fact ME/CFS is classified by the WHO as a **neurological disease** under ICD-10 G93.3. In their texts, OC has always been careful to refer to the illness as ME/CFS, so retaining the status of the original illness ME, and stressing the physical aetiology of these illnesses generally.

By making errors of this kind, however small they might appear to those who make them, either purposefully or by error, the Wikipedia editors and writers determinedly stated one side of the discourse. The arrogance of Wikipedia is also shown in this quote, in which the writer expresses the view that critics will come to their senses when they learn the Wikipedian rules, and language!

I will argue that biographies about the contentious lifestyle or work of prominent individuals are utterly without use or intelligent direction if they cite only 'facts'. What is more, accounts that cite only facts in uncritical biographies of contentious individuals, inevitably 'take sides' with that individual and the social effects of their words and deeds. I will cite a simple example, which is extreme and has nothing to

do in its substance with Professor Wessely (I have to stress this here, because no doubt next week I shall be accused of saying that Wessely is a Nazi).

In writing biographical text about Alfred Rosenberg, the senior ideologue of the German Nazi Party between 1930 and 1945, a compiler or writer who cited only his published writing and his rise within the hierarchy of Hitler's parliamentary party would be obscuring the less verifiable fact that his ideology and policies led to the deaths of 11 million Jews, Gypsies, gay, disabled and other human beings. Rosenberg, who was himself of Jewish extraction, was executed after a trial by the Allies in 1946.

Information is power, and the most powerful information, goes almost unnoticed as a convincing part of everyday culture. Every reason it is possible to find, argues that this information is rational and based upon a majority view, while in reality it is simply the prejudices of the most powerful minority groups, which often remains unquestioned by the majority.

If Wales and ZG were to have stuck honestly to the understanding of rounded neutrality in their Wikipedia entry for Professor Wessely, it would read something like this, little more, little less:

*Professor Simon Wessely has worked as a psychiatric medical researcher, mainly in Britain at the Institute of Psychiatry between 1985 and the present. Professor Wessely has argued on the basis of his research results that many apparently environmentally-provoked illnesses are the product of 'false illness beliefs' perceived and*

*presented by their sufferers as physical illnesses but having no basis in biological fact. In the areas of Gulf War Syndrome, electromagnetic fields, cell phones, ME and some categories of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Professor Wessely's personal views and 'research' results are contested by a large body of international scientific opinion, patient groups and clinicians.*

This is not, however, how the final entry reads, for it actually does something profoundly unobjective and decidedly not neutral in describing Wessely. The entry makes the assumption that Wessely's opinions, being based upon 'scientific' research, are *the* authoritative views backed by a long process of logical and accountable scientific investigation. This has never been the case. Examining Wessely's ongoing assertions about the subjectively perceived nature of illness, a neutral observer might conclude that his views have always been more ideological than scientific.

### **Wikipedia's Global Way with Words**

ZG's final entry on Professor Wessely was published in Wikipedia two weeks before Christmas. Although the entry was open for a short time to edit, this 'right' seems to have quickly ceased or at least been curtailed. During the fervent dispute that took place between 'Jimbo' Wales, Z G and One Click, a number of issues became clear.

The Wikipedians insist, **first**, that their task is to present neutral information, and, **second**, that the account of Wessely's work that would appear in Wikipedia would be an 'official'

view, created by reference to established medical journals that had published his work. **Third**, opposition to Wessely's work and ideas and their real social effect, could be written off as the incoherent and entirely subjective views of a small number of zealots. **Fourth**, despite Wikipedia being an apparently popular consensus 'publications', readers have no idea who the editors are *or where they are coming from*. For example, take the rabidly pro Wessely Jfdwolff who claims to be a Dutch medical doctor living in England. His contributions to the talk pages might lead one to seriously consider whether the pharmaceutical industry would not benefit from having well placed editors to cruise Wikipedia's medical and pharmaceutical entries. (See End Note A)

Perhaps most oddly, in a world that came to accept existentialism in large part over the past half century - *i.e.*, that who we are and what we do is to a degree governed by how we and our actions are perceived by others - Wikipedia appears to be seriously involved in trying to redefine people's experience and their perception of certain phenomena on a global scale.

Clearly there are complex problems with all of these views promulgated by Wikipedia. To state them simply and in summary form, it could be said that:

- In a textual dispute, neutrality is not achieved by simply describing objectively one side of the argument, especially if this 'side' is aided by the text's subject.
- There can hardly have been a scientific concept that has not been rebutted to its date of expiry. It is junk science to

assume that the history of science is a list of correct conclusions. In fact the opposite is the case.

- Opposition to incorrect 'scientific' conclusions is not only expressed by other scientists, it expressed in the political arena and amongst those who become victims of the science in question.
- Clearly there are numerous unopposed facts about the life history of Simon Wessely, which might be stated in a summary manner without subjective views clouding the issue. With respect to the conclusions of his work, however, all is open to question and critique. Even speculative and unproven criticisms from patients or research subjects are valid. Criticism, in the case of medical research from non professional patients that have any substance should be included in a biographical text, in the same way adverse reactions to drugs are listed.
- When we are dealing with methodologies outside pure physical science (and, remember, it is pure physical science for which Wessely's detractors are calling), entering the realms of psychology, psychiatry or even sociology, methodologies even more than results have to be rigorously investigated.
- The psychiatric assumptions that run through Wessely's academic work are not assumptions based on natural science, but highly-coloured views produced by subjectively-crafted methodologies. Any objective study of

Wessely's work has to question the definition of science that includes psychiatry.

- In medicine as in any other science, the 'official view' is not always the one that lasts or the one that can be described as true or 'the majority view'. There seemed to be recognition of this when one of the Wikieditors, in the heat of the Talk Pages debate, accepted that it was wrong to call the One Click dissenters, or others associated with them, *a small sub group*. In fact, when looking at environmental illness and, for instance, the effects of industry pollution on human health, from a global perspective, it is the Wesselyites who represent the small sub group. The view that people are perceiving illusory illnesses when they are actually suffering the effects of environmental toxins of different kinds has long been recognised as one that serves corporate vested interests and not science or the public health.
- Finally, germane to any real academic or textural objectivity is the idea that, in any controversy, the views of those who oppose the subject have to be examined in detail and written up with the same objectivity as that used to describe the subject.

To go deeply into a neutral encyclopaedic entry would entail backing up each side in the conflict created by Wessely's work, with references, and analysing the merits of each group's methodology, funding sources and other possible biases, research results and scientific authority. Instead of using such a time-honoured academic method, Z G reported the results of Wessely's work as if they were incontrovertible and as if his

'results' were his 'work' and reflected no bias or subjective starting point.

At one point in the debate, ZG published a long literature list, which he suggested confirmed Wessely's standing. Unfortunately, because ZG lives in the Wikiworld of Pedia, he has no grasp of how academics create authority within the *apparently* open discourse of their scientific specialisations: one way is to flood the area with accredited papers.

An analysis of Wessely's output could be arrived at only by analysing how many of these papers were peer reviewed, by whom and for what publications. And, in how many of them Wessely had simply contrived to have his name added to work of his colleagues and juniors in the various work-stations in which he networks. It goes without saying that academic papers that argue a contrary view to that of Wessely on specific subjects, also have to be cited and used as a tool to analyse his work. Wikipedia have, however, decided that views contrary to those of Wessely have probably not been 'scientifically' tested or objectively validated, and cannot therefore be quoted in a 'neutral' article. In fact, when compared with the physical science research carried out into ME/CFS, Wessely school psychiatric studies often appear unscientific.

While ZG offers the opportunity for edits from the public, under the heading of conflicting views, he evidently did not see it as his role to research and to include this information, and before the argument about content had ended, ZG had concluded that critical reviews of Wessely's work were, in the main, little more than the hysterical views of sufferers. Perhaps,

most alarmingly, having fallen in lock step with Wessely's views, the e-intellectual adventurers of Wikipedia cried foul when they were criticised by patients and campaigners.

### **Wikipedia's Arrogance on Entering a War Zone**

*Having seen Just Z G's and Martin Osterman's comments in their discussion page, and seen the fact that Wikipedia – with regard to lots of items – has real problems around 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' (understandable and inevitable), I think you gentlemen are not keeping to your own professed claims to be the arbiters of neutrality and objectivity at all. I am reassured that this problem of the competing power relations about who gets to claim 'neutrality' is happening all over Wikipedia – but I am not reassured that you gentlemen are actually helping the situation, despite your implied claims to have superior knowledge about editing on Wikipedia. And the insulting comment from the person about One Click on that page illustrates precisely my point about the problems with trying to claim 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' over others while happily taking part in partisan behaviour.*

(Anonymous contribution to talk page)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely/Archive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely/Archive)

Although Wikipedians do not make a point of acknowledging it, there are obvious problems with the manufacture of neutral public knowledge about contemporary institutions, movements, acts and individuals. One of these problems, perhaps the most complex, involves the transformation of personal experience into public fact, by whom and in what form.

One Click was founded by two women whose children were diagnosed with ME/CFS and are both seriously disabled

by their illness, and who were unable to obtain adequate care from the NHS. Acting as advocates for their children within an NHS strewn with vested interests, these women were brought into conflict with 'Wessely school' doctors, psychiatrists and medical research workers, as well as 'patient support groups', a number of which have long been infiltrated by interests inimical to patients' welfare.

The mental topography of an encyclopaediarist is clearly not that of either an academic or a political activist. The simple fact is that Professor Wessely can no more be separated from the ME community and their views of him than could Rosenberg (or any other Nazi) be separated from the Jewish people or the Gypsies (again I have to stress that I am not comparing these situations, just using the second as an analogy.) Of course, this interlocking of related social phenomena can be used in other situations sympathetically by a biographer who wanted to draw attention to relationships of social and political unity rather than social conflict. A theoretical example:

*The aristocrat Sir Herbert Hennesey was primarily responsible for bringing the production of Ford motor cars to Birmingham in 1956. The production of the Zephyr and Viva boosted the economy of the city and led to full employment during the late Fifties and early Sixties. Barney Smith, shop steward at Sparksville during this period, has been lavish in his praise of Sir Herbert. In a 1962 interview with the Birmingham Post, Smith said, 'Sir Herbert supported the skilled workers of Birmingham throughout the post-war period. His keen sense of economics and his sympathy with the people led him to be*

*accepted by the working class in a way that other 'captains of industry' could only dream of.'*

Had Wessely been given an award by a large prominent autonomous ME campaign group, so linking his work in a positive way to the community which he has affected, no doubt ZG would have 'objectively' made mention of it.

The idea that social phenomena and individuals cannot be explained separately, however, would have meant in the case of Professor Wessely, real analytical attention being given to the resisting ME community, with whom he is locked in battle. This, in turn, would have meant negotiating the views, politics and intelligent social criticism of Wessely's position from OC's perspective.

While Wales and ZG seemed to have every intention of asking Wessely about his own biography, they took quite a different position about OC. Instead of asking the two founding women to provide referenced information, editors set about changing the entry that they had submitted, without discussion, and insisted in preaching to them in a condescending manner as if they were better able to articulate their experience than the two women themselves.

*Also consider reading through the Wikipedia policies to get an appreciation for what we're up to. A good place to start is [Wikipedia: Five\\_pillars](#). You'll come to see that although these may feel constraining, they will work in your favour over the long haul: when people with opposing views to yours turn up, we will be equally diligent in making sure that they don't delete inconvenient facts or links to your views.*

William Pietri 18:30, 15 November 2005 (UTC)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely/Archive2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely/Archive2)

ZG went to some lengths to explain how biographical text should be written. He and other critics of One Click went so far as to suggest that when OC became more deeply involved in Wikipedia - perish the thought! - they would see how it was done.

*Reciting to yourself (in a fake cop show American accent if it helps): 'Just the facts please ma'am.' A neutral statement of facts will be kept to inform people, a tirade will suffer exactly the same fate as the Wessely article (or be deleted altogether). You should realise that this is done without malice, it's a policy which applies equally to every article whatever the subject. Articles I wrote have also been deleted or heavily edited. Everything on WP must be verifiable, ideally with citations on the talk page, and referenced to reputable publications (e.g. if you can bring forward a BMJ article suggesting that your interpretation has significant authoritative backing, that will count for a lot)*

*So, chill. Take time to reflect on not only what you say but the way in which you say it - it is the latter, not the former, which has caused much of the problem here.*

*Oh, and one last thing: if you want to achieve anything on Wikipedia, pissing off Jimmy Wales is a seriously bad way of going about it*

Just Zis Guy, you know?  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely/Archive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely/Archive)

*I see you've been blocked from editing for a week. When you get back to it, consider first working on some articles where you have knowledge but aren't so passionate. (You may find that hard, but consider that Wikipedia has made it for years without the perfect article on Simon Wessely; another few weeks won't hurt much in the grand scheme of things, and you'll do better work here with a bit more experience.) For example, if you've just gone through the process of writing a book and dealing with lawyers about a potentially controversial book, consider working on related articles like index or publishing or libel.*

William Pietri 18:30, 15 November 2005

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely/Archive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely/Archive)

Because Wikipedia is a cult with its own internal rules and power relations, its 'live in a bubble' compilers seemed to assume automatically that the lens through which they viewed Wessely and his work was the only one. Further, they seemed to think that two hard campaigning women with sick children would want to spend their time compiling entries for Wikipedia.

At no time does it seem to have occurred to ZG or his colleagues that Wikipedia 'objectivity' might not be the same as the objectivity of those involved in a medical and political struggle with Professor Wessely. It is almost as if the Wikipedia chroniclers have entered the village of an Amazonian tribe and found a family dispute in progress. Devoid of the necessary language or understanding of the culture, economics or history of the tribe, and after a cursory glance at the situation, they side with one party and then impose all their own moral, ethical, educational and political perspectives on their record of the conflict. When the tribe's people object to the Wikipedia view of their world, Wikipedians tell them that this is how Wikipedia does things and if they spend time learning about Wikipedia, they will realise it is the correct way.

ZG actually, Jesus like, goes so far as to offer a little parable, so that One Click can get their thoughts into focus and better understand their predicament.

*Here is a little story for you. Once upon a time there was a little bird. It was winter time and the little bird was freezing. He stood in the middle of a field, unable to fly back to his nest because he was so cold. After a while a cow came along and deposited a substantial cowpat on the little bird. The cowpat was hot and steamy, and soon the little bird was warm. He sang for joy! Hearing him sing, a cat came along. "Let me dig you out, little bird, so you can fly home" said the cat. The bird agreed, and the cat dug him out - then pounced on him and ate him.*

*The moral of this story is:*

- *Just because someone shits on you, that does not mean they are your enemy.*
- *Just because someone digs you out of the shit, that does not mean they are your friend.*
- *If you are in the shit and happy, keep quiet.*

Just zis Guy, you know? [T]/[C] (W) AfD? 13:03,  
15 November 2005

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely/Archive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely/Archive)

You are left to wonder, not only what the One Click women were meant to make of *that*, but also how an organisation claiming objectivity and neutrality can be headed by a man whose judgements may be clouded or distorted when he's 'seriously pissed off'.

When, Wikipedia, got involved in adjudicating a text about Professor Simon Wessely, they entered what can best be described as a war zone, within which an uneven battle has been raging over two decades.

The One Click campaign is the only truly dissident group in Britain that is still trying to defend ME patients from the drift

towards the growing manufacture of mental illness in the UK and North America. As a dissident group that adheres stoically to its principles, it has developed as part of its political strategy a heavily satirical and combative turn of phrase. While this style has a long history in English dissident movements going back to the 18th century and journalists such as Defoe, it no longer suits the purveyors of sanitised consensus-speak, which masquerades as political language in post-industrial Britain.

One Click developed this strategy because they believe that their campaign is defending ME sufferers against an intransigent and very powerful 'enemy', which has consistently got away with damaging patients by using bogus treatments, ridicule, and exclusion.

Amazingly, in April last year, Jane Bryant was arrested under the Harassment Act by London police, who turned up at her house where she lives with her son, diagnosed with ME. In the police station, one of her arresting officers said - while admitting that she might not have committed a crime - that she 'should have toned down her language'. The same police officer also suggested that using the Harassment Act against her in this way 'was treading a very fine line'. Her arrest raises serious questions about the right to the expression of political dissent in Britain, and bears comparison with the visit of police to the house of the journalist who expressed a personal view in a televised debate about gay men adopting children, in December. There can be little doubt that 1984 - which took 20 years to arrive - is finally in residence in Britain.

The other founder of One Click, Angela Kennedy, had been put through a catalogue of abuse in 2004 when One Click was set up. Her involvement in the legitimate campaign on behalf of her own child and others suffering from ME had almost led to her dismissal from her university post, when a psychiatric lobbyist, Dr Charles Shepherd, wrote to her employers, making serious but unfounded complaints about her professional behaviour. Shepherd has also levelled unfounded complaints against other critics of the psychiatric lobby, on one occasion attempting to get the Emeritus Professor Malcolm Hooper discharged from his university.

In this context, treating ME patients and their advocates as if they were first year pupils in a class on the ethics of civilised textual argument, is like berating an adult who uses an expletive during a powerful and cogently put argument – ‘Well, if your going to swear, I’m not talking to you.’

The fact is that the OC and its campaign is, beneath its strategic facade, built upon sound argument backed by both physical and social science and thoroughly researched data. All of the original texts to their arguments are accessible on their website or in available publications. There is, also, a more-than-adequate record of the battles that have been fought over Wessely’s research, over various guidelines for dealing with patients, and such things as the Chief Medical Officer’s Report. In the main, descriptions and analysis of these references have maintained an excellent academic standard, and in themselves chronicle a serious account of both sides of the conflict between psychiatrists and physical scientists over ME.

Z G, however, neglected to read the great weight of well presented text on the OC site, and focused on its political rhetoric instead. While he might have an understanding of how to edit text on an e-encyclopedia, he has no idea of how to relate to people who feel oppressed. Nor does he appear to have the faintest comprehension of political struggles and the tactics and defensive strategies into which combatants find themselves forced.

### **A Metabiography?**

Because it is not possible to understand the actions and words of Professor Wessely by viewing only his formal role in the world of research, it is necessary to mention some of the known links that he has with vested interest groups whose record on science has been consistently questioned.

In the late Eighties, Wessely was a committed member of the British Campaign Against Health Fraud (another part of his history which he has since denied), Britain's pre-eminent 'quackbusting' organisation, originally funded by pharmaceutical and medical insurance companies, which later called itself - and still is called - HealthWatch. At the time, Wessely was campaigning with journalist/newspaper hack Caroline Richmond against the idea that ME was an illness with a physical aetiology. He was also campaigning with Caroline Richmond against the idea of allergy as a physical reality, according to Richmond, allergy was, like ME, all in the mind. HealthWatch is now supported by and linked to the corporate science lobby - funded in part by

the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry – Sense About Science, to which Professor Wessely is an advisor.

Fairly recently, Wessely joined the advisory board of the [North] American Council on Science and Health (ACSH). This organisation, funded entirely by corporate interests and in major part by Monsanto and leading pharmaceutical companies, leads the field in describing any kind of chemical injury or undiagnosed physical illness as having psychiatric causes.

ACSH itself is linked directly to the American Council on Health Fraud, North America's leading quackbuster organisation, which, because of legal actions against it, has had to divide into differently named groups. Stephen Barrett's QuackWatch, one of the principle break-away groups, denies the existence of ME, multiple chemical sensitivity and Gulf War Syndrome. Barrett, a non-practising psychiatrist, is also a member of the ACSH advisory Board. ACSH is linked to the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), one of the major anti-alternative health organisations in North America.

Professor Wessely has, since its inception, been an adviser to PRISMA, a highly-capitalised multinational corporation with offices across Europe, North America and Canada. This company gives insurance-covered treatments, which have at their core Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Graded Exercise Therapy, in a growing number of countries. The fact that advice about treatment from Professor Wessely to any government, local government or corporation, might ultimately result in the

engagement of PRISMA, represents a serious conflict of interests that should be mentioned in relation to all his research findings in this area. (See End Note B)

Wessely's consistent need for image rehabilitation, over the past decade, in the face of criticism from the ME community, has moved him to get others to speak for him. His ten-year association with Elaine Showalter, and the insightful help which he gave her with her intellectually bankrupt book, *Hystories*, is a case in point. In this, Showalter pontificated, without any suggestion of proof, that both ME and Gulf War Syndrome are mental aberrations on a par with beliefs in alien abductions.

The psychiatric view of ME promulgated by psychiatrists and psychologists predominates in a number of English-speaking countries, but is not the formal view of various government agencies around the world. It is not, for instance, the view of the World Health Organisation (WHO), the US CDC or the Canadian government. In Britain, the cynical psychiatric view of Gulf War Syndrome, of which Wessely was the original architect - 'Gulf War Vets get GWS when they talk to other Vets who claim to have it' - suffered a complete collapse following the pronouncement of the government-funded Committee of Inquiry into the illness in 1995.

### **The Uses of the Psychiatric Argument**

You don't have to be a sociologist to understand that some individuals' lives are free of public conflict, and that therefore

their working lives can be described from a relatively objective standpoint. Conflicts in the working life of an architect might arise, only if his buildings fall down, or stay up, against all the advice of his peers. There might, in some extreme circumstances, be a popular movement against an architect, but it is unlikely. The personality and relationships of a mountaineer might reach the books, only if she rejected advice and died while climbing, or her actions lead to the death of another. The careers of most sportsmen and women can be described with bare objectivity by relating their accomplishments. With some, such as the recently deceased George Best, their highly-publicised private lives produce value judgements, only when they affect their professional careers.

At the very top of the pyramid, where conflict and value judgements are an inherent part of work, are politicians, closely followed by other professionals, such as physicians, judges and scientists, whose working and personal lives inevitably affect the lives of large numbers of people.

The whole post-modern academic movement has been a movement towards discovering the undercurrents of the individual's professional motivation and funding - towards personal disclosure rather than professional closure.

The redefinition of ME as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome by Professor Wessely and others, and the continuous denigration of those who have claimed to suffer from ME, have been reflected in a series of social and cultural policies and tendencies, which have made immeasurably more difficult the lives of a large number of sick people over the past 20 years.

Insurance companies have used psychiatric aetiology as a screen behind which to hide. Chemical companies have used psychiatric aetiology as a way of diverting responsibility from those illnesses which accrue from toxic damage. The promotion of a psychiatric aetiology has led to a cheaply-bought set of irrational treatment policies, which in turn have been used both to disguise the cause and to distort the investigation of ME. Culturally, psychiatric research into ME led, throughout the Eighties and Nineties, to those suffering from the illness being labelled as self-indulgent, neurotic whingers, and to their campaign support groups been seen as politically dangerous and misleading.

Professor Wessely's role has been central and primary in influencing these changes and these policies. Any discussion or description of Professor Wessely has to address these influences, in order to be as honest and as truthful as any textural biographical account can be.

The public conflict around many professionals might eventually find expression in disciplinary hearings by professional bodies. Their deliberations and decisions are usually accepted by 'the public' as authoritative (except in cases where due process is used wrongly or corrupted), although, in some instances, professional or legal discredit is so long in coming that it is too late to help victims.

In Britain over the past two decades there have been notorious cases of psychiatrists who have abused their professional expertise, and also of doctors who have acted

criminally while evading exposure by professional bodies. This fact provides good grounds for listening to dissenting voices, especially when they represent large numbers of people.

The existence and mediation of these conflicts, which have developed around Professor Wessely, seem to have passed Z G by. Perhaps, alone in the world of reporting, he believes himself above conflict, able to divine an objective reality to the life and times of one of the most controversial psychiatrist's in post-war Britain. Hoping to cast himself in a sympathetic light, he says, 'until I began work on Wessely's entry in Wikipedia, I knew absolutely nothing about him.' What would normally be an admission of ignorance is here proffered as badge of 'clean slate' neutrality.

Other of his statements are perhaps even more sublimely ridiculous. 'I'm only interested in his work,' Z G blathers on, offering this excuse for his lack of intellectual perspicuity, as if people have made unproven accusations about Wessely's sexual preferences or the way he treats his wife. Casting a shadow over the whole exercise, Z G uses this utterly spurious argument to lead his readers to believe that those who oppose Wessely are somehow attacking him on an 'unfair' personal level.

This last point brings us to what is the most bizarre yet glaring nonsense in Z G's position specifically, and in the more general position of Wikipedia. In the virtual world in which ZG lives, he seeks support and authority for what he says about Wessely only from academic journals (the *BMJ* in particular) and Wessely himself. Working on the premise that anything

written by the opposition to Wessely and his group is unsafe and lacking in any kind of credibility, he simply ignores a veritable library of international information critical of Wessely's position. Not surprisingly, not all these texts have been written by doctors or psychiatrists, nor have they been published in the pages of the *BMJ* – after all, the *BMJ* is the house journal of the British Medical Association, the 'doctors' union'.

The most lazy or incompetent first-year university student knows that the production of knowledge has a heritage of structural rules (no, not Wikipedia rules, but those wrought by the academy over centuries). If it didn't, knowledge production would never move forward. In the case of writing about the ideas of academics, medical professionals, or psychiatrists, or architects, the first prerequisite is the 'literature review'. Only after investigating in full detail what has previously been produced on the subject, by everyone from classical scholars to television film makers to authors of book reviews, can the writer hope to produce anything which is moored in contemporary reality. It doesn't matter how this is done. (Personally, I could not see the benefit in putting this in a chunk at the beginning of a Wikipedia entry.) It has, though, to be done in some shape or form. If it is not done, even in truncated fashion, a biographical entry that mentions research into ME is no better than one person's subjective navel-gazing.

I consider myself a writer in permanent opposition; one, I might add, with a fine heritage, but undoubtedly on the critical fringes. I know that my work is publicly ignored often for political reasons. I am not, therefore, entirely surprised that a

Wikipedian would steer clear of my published work, especially my book [Skewed](#), about bias and conflict of interest in ME research.

However, it is clearly not possibly for anyone but an academic eunuch to write about Simon Wessely without referring to, or at least mentioning, Margaret Williams's trailblazing texts, *Denigration by Design*, produced in two volumes in the mid-Nineties. These 500 pages clearly chart the rise of the psychiatric view of ME, in Professor Wessely's own publicly recorded words and those of and his acolytes.

Z G makes the unreferenced assertion, which seems to come directly from the horse's mouth, that it was only in the early years of Wessely's research that he believed that ME was a mental rather than physically-initiated illness. Neither the word 'early', nor its duration, is qualified. This is a preposterous statement, which snaps at the very heart of the conflict that has raged around Wessely's work. It must be qualified and referenced. As it stands it is an absolute distortion of the truth – a mendacious piece of propaganda.

## **Conclusions**

*Researchers who do research that is unwelcome to certain groups, or who speak out about social issues, sometimes come under attack. Some of the methods used to attack dissenting scholars include ostracism, petty harassment, withdrawal of research grants, blocking of appointments or promotions, punitive transfers, reprimands, demotions, spreading of rumours, dismissal, and blacklisting. In many cases attacks on researchers have the consequence of suppressing research data.*

Brian Martin, Suppressing Research Data: methods, context, accountability, and responses. *Accountability in Research*, Vol. 6, pp.333-327.

The research and theories produced by Professor Wessely over twenty years have been almost the sole fuel feeding the engine of British social, financial and political policy on ME and, until recently, Gulf War Syndrome. Almost single handed, Wessely has stayed the onward movement of biophysical research in these areas.

In 2005, the British ME 'establishment', having fought for twenty years to maintain the authority of the psychiatric aetiology of ME and CFS, decided upon a new strategy. This entailed acceding to the idea that ME might after all, in some people, be a physical illness. The very individuals who had, over two decades, denigrated and ridiculed those who proposed an organic aetiology, are now suddenly setting up Scientific Groups in the House of Commons and holding meetings at the Medical Research Council, creating the illusion that they are about to place both medical authority and funding behind scientific research.

This putative change of direction comes only after constant campaigning criticism of the psychiatric lobby during almost twenty years. It comes late in the day, after the setting up of the pro-psychiatric PACE and FINE trials, and the setting up of a countrywide network of clinics, for which the government has provided £11.1 million. The clinics have already employed or advertised for staff psychologists and psychiatrists, and will provide no facilities for physical investigations into the illness.

Professor Wessely and the psychiatric lobby now appear intent upon rewriting the history of ME research, painting themselves as the party that has not only always believed that ME is a physical illness, but has also gradually established this very fact through its own diligent research. If this is successful, within a short time all critical history of patients and carers will have been expunged from the record.

One of the most necessary parts of the strategy is to shore up Professor Wessely's reputation. Although his position as Professor of Liaison and Epidemiological Psychiatry within the Institute of Psychiatry, and his other attachments, give off an aura of secure prestige, he has been under prolonged public siege from his critics. For Wessely and his supporters, it now appears vital that he is brought in from the psychiatric cold, to be integrated into mainstream medical research, perhaps with a future role in the MRC. Most importantly, Wessely must be granted a status in medicine that has been denied him by large groups of patients who have battled against his unproven psychiatric theories.

The bald facts of a person's life, tell us nothing about the resonance of their actions in the world, or their power. As soon as we put these facts into context, it becomes necessary, in the cause of method and truth, to examine the organisations and institutions that the subject inhabits. It is necessary not only to produce more facts about these organisation and institutions, but to culturally embed them.

The psychiatric view of the origins of ME has never been – and, indeed, *can* never be – scientifically tested until the

physical science is done, nor is it based upon scientific or rational theories about physical illness. Under the guidance of Professor Wessely and his followers, the NHS has failed to recognise ME as a physical illness and patients have therefore been denied appropriate treatment.

The stigmatising of ME patients with mental illness, and the refusal of doctors to investigate ME's physical origins, together with the charging of relatives and carers with psychiatric profiles such as Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, is one of the greatest scandals of British medicine.

The psychiatric paradigm of ME fits with the developing theoretical view in Britain and the US that there are a rapidly increasing number of mentally ill citizens. This view and its links with, for instance, the US audit of mental health, is almost definitely associated with the marketing of the older antidepressant drugs and the upcoming range of cognitive-enhancing pharmaceuticals.

Wikipedia adopted its tried and tested rubrics for biographical writing in the case of Simon Wessely. ZG reduced text about him to an apparently neutral recitation of facts. Other facts, such as Wessely's involvement in various groups that do not necessarily reflect well on him as an objective researcher, were expunged from the record or not even researched. ZG shows a woeful lack of curiosity – a major shortcoming in an encyclopaedist, given that an encyclopaedia, by definition, should contain, as far as possible or thinkable, the whole range of human knowledge.

When he received what he considered argumentative e-mails from the One Click campaign, his interest was not piqued by the intimation of strong feelings about an important medical controversy. (One wonders, in passing, how he might have responded, before 2005, to less-than-reverential contributions from supporters of Sally Clark and Angela Cannings, in the matter of Sir Roy Meadows.) Rather, he and some of his colleagues responded with a kind of aggressive naivete and ignorance about the political and medical culture within which the lives of patients and their children were embedded.

What Wikipedia should have done, after carrying out the necessary research from a wide range of published sources, was to immediately fully integrate into Wessely's biographical text, at least the presence of and reference to arguments of his critics. Instead they chose to see opposition to him as irrational and unsubstantiated criticism coming from the fringe - in effect, they aligned themselves with Wessely's public and unproven views that people who have ME, and those who campaign for them, do not have a intelligent and fact-based case against his work and the social policies that it has created. So much for neutrality.

Only time will tell whether or not the psychiatric lobby is actually sincere in its putative re-evaluation of its work and aims. One thing, however, is certain: that is that, in reviewing the past and writing up the present, through the person of Professor Simon Wessely, ZG and Wikipedia are clearly revealed as propagandists, their adherence to the truth, exposed as no more glue than spit on the palm of a hand which attempts to raise a ten-ton truck.

When eventually history records the truth about the battle to disassemble ME and to marginalise its sufferers, Wikipedia will stand out as having lent credibility to psychiatric opinions that have grown out of vested interests and have so far deprived many sufferers of realistic and effective treatments. It will also be remembered that Wikipedia was the vehicle through which Wessely tried to ghost write both his recent history and his seminal public statements, almost all of which has been dedicated to proving that ME is no more than 'a belief that you have an illness called ME'.

Perhaps the last word should be left to ZG and one of his Wikipedia editorial colleagues. Fairly satisfied that Wikipedia had beaten off the irrational female hordes, they had this companionable exchange of comradely support. It should be read over the final music of Eric Coates's stirring Dam Busters March, in clipped British accents, for best effect.

*And JFW, I greatly appreciate the moral support, thanks. -*

Just Zis Guy, you know? [T]/[C] AfD? 18:57, 22 December 2005 (UTC)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely)

*My pleasure, Guy. I was getting a bit nauseated that you seemed to have become the lightning rod for the One Clickers. I won't be sending these people any emails, you can bet!*

JFW | T@lk 19:56, 22 December 2005 (UTC)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon\\_Wessely](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Simon_Wessely)

## END NOTES

(A)

A lawyer who regularly follows One Click wrote in to suggest that editors and writers for Wikipedia should declare their interests, otherwise readers will never know if entries have been slanted. He gives amongst other examples that of the entries on vaccination.

'If you take a look again at "Andrew73"'s discussion page [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User\\_talk:Andrew73&oldid=32104320](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User_talk:Andrew73&oldid=32104320) and the click on the history tab you will then see the pseudonyms of people who crop up all over the vaccine pages giving a hard time to people who try to edit some semblance of normality into them. They beat up regularly on 'Ombudsman' who has done a brilliant job of building pages to try to achieve some balance.

(B)

In June 2003, professor Wessely wrote to the 'quick response' site of the BMJ, with his view about conflict of interest. Professor Wessely suggested with typically English understatement, that it was a non-issue.

It is time we all grew up ... A few pens, a sponsored sandwich lunch for our weekly research meeting, and even a trip to another forgettable conference, probably are rather low in the list of things that affect our decision making.

In my book SKEWED (p. 248-250) I follow this quote with the following paragraph.

What about the relationship between government funding and policy towards defence department personnel with Gulf War Syndrome? What about British and US government research grants and bio-markers for Gulf War Syndrome? What about the relationship between ME and CFS researchers and the insurance industry? What about the reluctance of the major chemical companies and their insurance experts to agree upon the existence of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity ... professor Wessely's letter presents a bizarre picture of a society which works by accident, where things happen as they might on the

Magic Roundabout, without reason or personal motive, absent of any ultimate adverse effect upon the powerless.

# **The WWW. Weird World of Wikipedia**

By Martin J. Walker  
February 2006