



The law has no place in scientific disputes

*****UPDATE 10 December 2009***The Campaign is gaining momentum and we have now joined with English PEN and Index on Censorship in the Coalition for Libel Reform. Add your voice and sign the petition to urge politicians to support a bill for major reform of the libel laws now, at www.libelreform.org.**

We the undersigned believe that it is inappropriate to use the English libel laws to silence critical discussion of medical practice and scientific evidence.

The British Chiropractic Association has sued Simon Singh for libel. The scientific community would have preferred that it had defended its position about chiropractic for various children's ailments through an open discussion of the peer reviewed medical literature or through debate in the mainstream media.

Singh holds that chiropractic treatments for asthma, ear infections and other infant conditions are not evidence-based. Where medical claims to cure or treat do not appear to be supported by evidence, we should be able to criticise assertions robustly and the public should have access to these views.

English libel law, though, can serve to punish this kind of scrutiny and can severely curtail the right to free speech on a matter of public interest. It is already widely recognised that the law is weighted heavily against writers: among other things, the costs are so high that few defendants can afford to make their case. The ease and success of bringing cases under the English law, including against overseas writers, has led to London being viewed as the "libel capital" of the world.

Freedom to criticise and question in strong terms and without malice is the cornerstone of scientific argument and debate, whether in peer-reviewed journals, on websites or in newspapers, which have a right of reply for complainants. However, the libel laws and cases such as *BCA v Singh* have a chilling effect, which deters scientists, journalists and science writers from engaging in important disputes about the evidential base supporting products and practices. The libel laws discourage argument and debate and merely encourage the use of the courts to silence critics.

The English law of libel has no place in scientific disputes about evidence; the *BCA* should discuss the evidence outside of a courtroom. Moreover, the *BCA v Singh* case shows a wider problem: we urgently need a full review of the way that English libel law affects discussions about scientific and medical evidence.

[Sign the statement now](#)

[Click here to read additional comments from signatories](#)

Everyone below signed as an individual unless otherwise stated

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Professor Martin Humphries University of Manchester and Chair, The Biochemical Society

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Journalism and Publishing

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Monica Ali Writer and Member, English PEN

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown Journalist and Columnist

Julian Baggini Journalist and Writer

Wendy Barnaby Editor, People and Society

Penelope Bennett Writer and Member, English PEN

David Bodanis Journalist and Author

Rosie Boycott Former Editor, The Independent and Independent on Sunday

Geoffrey Carr Science Editor, The Economist

Marcus Chown Author, Journalist and cosmology consultant to New Scientist

Duncan Campbell Journalist and Author

Dr Philip Campbell Editor-in-Chief, Nature

Nick Cohen Columnist, The Observer

Clive Cookson Science Editor, Financial Times

Amanda Craig Writer and Member, English PEN

Nick Davies Journalist and Author of Flat Earth News

Blain Fairman Writer and Member, English PEN

Kendrick Frazier Editor, Skeptical Inquirer

Martin Gardner Author, Former *Scientific American* columnist and prominent skeptic

James Gleick Science Writer and Journalist

Dr Ben Goldacre Writer, Broadcaster and Medical Doctor

David Hare Writer and Member, English PEN

Nigel Hawkes Director, Straight Statistics and Former Health Editor, The Times

Mark Henderson Science Editor, The Times

Roger Highfield Editor, New Scientist

Eva Hoffman Writer and Member, English PEN

Dr Richard Horton FRS FMedSci Editor, The Lancet

Alok Jha Science and Environment Correspondent, The Guardian

Rohit Jaggi Columnist, Financial Times

Frances Jessup Writer and Member, English PEN

Barry Karr Skeptical Inquirer and Committee for Skeptical Inquiry

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Hari Kunzru Writer and Member, English PEN

Sam Lister Health Editor, The Times

Brenda Maddox Journalist and Biographer

Kenan Malik Journalist and Author

Marilyn Malin Writer and Member, English PEN

Naomi May Writer and Member, English PEN

Dr Margaret McCartney Columnist, Financial Times and GP

Caspar Melville Editor, New Humanist magazine and Chief Executive, The Rationalist Association

Robin McKie Science Correspondent, The Observer

George Monbiot Journalist

Andrew Mueller Journalist and Author

Beverley Naidoo Writer and Member, English PEN

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Andrew Sugden Deputy Editor, *Science*

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Bill Thompson Technology Journalist

Margaret Wertheim Science Writer

Arts, Humanities and Entertainment

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Joan Bakewell Broadcaster and Journalist

Antony Beevor Historian

Jo Brand Performer

Derren Brown Psychological Illusionist

Alain de Botton Author

Carol Ann Duffy Poet Laureate

Peter Florence Director of The Guardian Hay Festival

Stephen Fry Broadcaster and Author

Ricky Gervais Writer and Performer

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Harry Hill Performer

Robin Ince Performer

Tim Minchin Performer

Dara O'Briain Performer

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Libby Purves Broadcaster, Journalist and Author

Jonathan Ross TV presenter

David Starkey Historian

Teller Illusionist, Juggler and Libertarian

Sandi Toksvig Broadcaster, Comedian and Author

Dr Richard Vranich Performer and Ex-physicist

Skeptics and Campaign Groups

Luis Alfonso The Spanish Skeptics group **Circulo Esceptico**

The Association for Skeptical Enquiry, UK

Australian Council Against Health Fraud

Australian Skeptics Inc

Peter Bowditch Editor, www.ratbags.com

Neil Denny Little Atoms podcast

Rachael Dunlop Reporter, Skeptic Zone podcast

Hanno Essen Chairman and on behalf of the Swedish sceptics Vetenskap och Folkblidning

European Council of Skeptical Organisations

Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften The German Skeptics group

Jonathan Heawood Director, English PEN

Gabor Hrasko Executive President and on behalf of The Hungarian Skeptic Society

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Andy Lewis Blogger, quackometer.net

Ronald A Lindsay President and CEO, Center for Inquiry, USA

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Baroness Helena Kennedy QC Barrister and Labour Member of the House of Lords

This statement has been sent to the Department for Culture Media and Sport, No 10 and the Department of Justice on Thursday 4th June and with every additional 1000 names we will be sending the statement again to Government until there is a commitment and a timetable from the parties for the necessary legislation. [Next 1000 names here \(these will be added as quickly as we can\).](#)

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