

A Tribute to John J. Cannell, M.D.

By Richard P. Phelps

If you are reading this, likely you have a background and training in education. Imagine that one day you observe an anomaly in the reporting of medical research information—an anomaly so striking that you suspect medical researchers might be making false claims. But, you have no background or training in medicine or medical research.

So, you inquire, and you are told that you are mistaken and everything really is fine. Skeptical, you inquire some more and you are told that you do not have the background or training to understand what is a very technical topic. Still skeptical, you inquire some more and people stop returning your calls.

Then, on your own time, you gather massive amounts of evidence, in a subject area—medicine—unfamiliar to you, analyze it, and, on your own, publish the results.

Some people within the field of medicine finally acknowledge that you might have a point, and you gain some celebrity. At this juncture, very strange creatures emerge from the depths who claim to agree with you, when they really do not, along with even stranger creatures who cite your work as evidence for their own causes, when it really is not.

How many people would be willing to put themselves through all this?

I do not have many heroes, but Dr. Cannell is one. I have spent a considerable amount of time tilting at windmills myself and would like to think that I have been as courageous and persistent as him. But, that is wishful thinking. What Dr. Cannell has done is akin to traveling to another country, where one does not know the language or customs, and fighting alone against an army, navy, and air force of opponents.

I hope that one day Dr. Cannell will appreciate and savor what he has accomplished. Twenty years ago, few states had content standards, much less tests aligned to them. Now most do.

Twenty years ago, most states that mandated tests neither designed nor administered them. Many local districts administered “off-the-shelf” nationally norm-referenced tests (designed mainly to be monitoring tests) with low or no stakes and little or no test security, and then misrepresented the results. Now, most states design or customize standards-based exams with high stakes and the high level of test security that the current legal environment demands of high-stakes tests.

A lot has changed in twenty years and, in my opinion, changed for the better. And, no single individual deserves more credit for it than John J. Cannell.