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Richard Harris on the changing format of scientific research

Science journalist Richard Harris visited the University last Thursday and gave a speech on the dwindling effects of scientific research, promoting his book *Rigor Mortis*, which dives into the aforementioned subject.

“This is a story really about problems that are slowing down progress in science,” said Harris. “Science hasn’t stopped at all, but there *is* friction slowing it down.”

Harris makes the claim that there are several reasons why this is happening.

According to Harris, the media is not validating the new research that comes out. For example, a colleague studied news sources concerning an idea of Parkinson's Disease being connected with a certain pesticide.

“Out of 150 studies [of news sources]... only about a third of them held up further scrutiny about further study,” said Harris. “This is consistent with a lot of smaller studies that suggest that about half of what is published about medical literature does not stand the test of time.”

This inconsistency in the media does not hold scientists accountable for their work and can cause discrepancies for other scientists using this research, leading to slow research progress.

It is a pretty sobering thought, when you take a moment to pause and reflect that half [of all studies] is wrong,” said Harris.

Another problem lies within the science itself. Most studies are not reproducible.

“We went through this process with 53 base studies and in the end, this paper reports that you can only reproduce six of them,” said Harris. “Just a 11% success rate.”

With this experiments not being reproducible, the research gained from these studies cannot be fully trusted, thus adding to the slow progress in science research.

“53% of scientists say this is a significant crisis,” said Harris.

Harris explains that there are solutions to this problem.

Harris explains that scientists need to find their passion for research again, in order to produce reliable and validatable findings.

“If they are driven by the condition of just keeping food on the table and keeping their labs open, that is a bad incentive,” said Harris.

Another solution is the better training of scientists.

“[Scientists] need to be aware that [some experiments] are not good ideas and these are not good practices in thinking about and designing an experiment.” said Harris.

Harris believes much more would be accomplished if scientists spent more time with experiments that are more sufficiently promising instead of theories that do not have any proof whatsoever.

Harris is a journalist for NPR. He has covered a wide range of topics including global warming, and medicine. He has won several awards throughout his career including (but not limited to) the 1995 Peabody Award and 2013 Presidential Citation for Science and Society.

Harris continues to believe that slow research is becoming a real problem, particularly in the medical field, but he believes scientific research can be restored to its former glory.