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Spotted: Rebranding oxytocin; marsupial madness

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Rebranding oxytocin

Some people call it the ‘love molecule’; others prefer ‘cuddle hormone.’ There’s no shortage of warm, fuzzy nicknames for oxytocin, but what autism researchers really want is hard science.

An article published this week in *Nature* suggests the **old hormone needs a new shtick** — a rebranding of sorts. “It doesn’t induce love; it doesn’t induce massive amounts of trust,” **Adam Guastella**, clinical psychologist at the University of Sydney, told *Nature*. “The sorts of biology we’re studying here are incredibly complex.”

Trials testing the hormone’s effects in people with autism have been inconclusive. That’s why researchers are taking a step back trying to truly understand oxytocin’s effects in the brain. For more about the molecule’s lingering promise, check out our **Q&A with oxytocin pioneer Larry Young**, director of the Silvio O. Conte Center for Oxytocin and Social Cognition at Emory University in Atlanta.

Data stash

Stanford University has received a \$9 million grant from the Hartwell Foundation to establish the **world’s largest autism database**. Dubbed iHART, for the Hartwell Autism Research and Technology Initiative, the database will house genetic, brain imaging and behavioral information about 5,000 individuals with autism. Best of all, it’s open-access, meaning users are free to tap the data for their own research needs.

Retraction reaction

Retractions are **getting more attention** than they used to. Whether they stem from honest mistakes or full-on fraud, they must damage a researcher's credibility, right?

An article published this week in *Science* looks at the **extent of that damage**. Citing a May report by the National Bureau of Economic Research, the article says bigwig biomedical scientists see a 10 percent dip in citations of past papers after an 'honest mistake' retraction. This dip swells to 20 percent after misconduct.

The citation hit is a penalty, "but it's not a death sentence," John Walsh, professor of public policy at the Georgia Institute of Technology, told *Science*. "One way to think about it is you can survive a scandal."

Rumor mill

Speaking of fraud, an article published this week in *Poynter* looks at the growing **role of rumor websites** in uncovering scientific misconduct. One such site, PoliSciRumors.com, documented rumblings of foul play on the infamous **gay marriage study** almost six months before the high-profile retraction by *Science*, according to the article.

Marsupial madness

An op-ed by **Emily Willingham** that *Forbes* published this week highlights the **hazards of press releases** — the short blurbs journals and institutions send out to summarize important studies. In theory, they give journalists a rundown of the study's implications. But they can be misleading.

Case in point: A press release issued last week by *Current Biology* suggested that studying left-handed kangaroos **may shed light on autism**. Autism is never mentioned in the study, but several news sites that covered the study **highlighted the connection**. One article even stated that "autism is **widespread among kangaroos**."

"I have seen autism attributed to animals from mice to horses to cats, but kangaroos? That's a first," Willingham wrote, stressing that autism is, by definition, a human disorder.

The mistake serves as a valuable reminder of the importance of **clear, correct communication** between scientists and the public.
