John Snow, hero of cholera: RIP

The myth of Snow is not a harmless fable. It ignores the fact that what we call John Snow’s cholera studies were not the work of a lone individual; this denies the community of science while promoting the myth of the brilliant, solitary researcher.

Yes, cholera is waterborne but science is not about being “right.” It is about convincing others of the rightness of an argument and that Snow did not do. Ignoring that does violence to the idea of juried research, and of the community of science that Snow passionately participated in.

Let John Snow rest in peace. Let the myth die, too. It is not a fable we need today.

Tom Koch PhD
Bioethicist
Vancouver, BC

REFERENCES

This article is excerpted from Tom Koch’s lecture, “Cholera in 1850s London: John Snow and his contemporaries,” presented May 8, 2008 at the Warburg Institute, University of London. Tom Koch has written widely on 19th-century cholera and John Snow.

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