

## Editorial

DOI:10.1111/j.1478-3223.2011.02723.x

### The power of one and saving private Brailion

*“Be of good cheer, Master Ridley. We shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out!”*

- Hugh Latimer to his friend Nicholas Ridley as they were about to be burned for heresy, Oxford, 1555

2011 has certainly been a tumultuous year in the world. Who could have predicted at the beginning of the year that a single brave but irreversible act of protest by a disenfranchised and desperate young man in Tunisia, Mohamed Abouazizi, would trigger a chain of events that would lead to the overthrow of longstanding despotic regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and foment mass protests in a host of other countries in the region. This so-called “Arab Spring” was clearly ignited by the tragic self-immolation of that one individual, and it is likely that the ‘domino effect’ has yet to end: several other autocratic regimes in that (or other) part(s) of the world may also see their final days in the months to come.

This is all the more astonishing because the Arab Spring is occurring in a region of the world where autocratic rule has attempted to block or diminish the rights and power of the individual. In such countries, the only individuals with the power to effect change are those oligarchs who reign as the heads of governments or royal families.

Outside of the Middle East, in the realms of government, business and healthcare, the power of one person to make a difference has recently been highlighted by so-called ‘whistleblowers’. Corrupt business practices and an entire huge corporation at the former Enron Corporation were brought down by a single whistleblower who first alerted authorities to the wrongdoing. Whistleblowers are now seen as crucial persons who raise the alert when the leaders of organizations and governments engage in wrongdoing. In such an atmosphere, raising the initial alert is potentially a career-limiting or even career-ending move. Thus several governments have passed legislation protecting whistleblowers.

Unfortunately even with such legislation, whistleblowers can suffer severe deleterious consequences as a result of their actions. In the healthcare field, a recent egregious example of whistleblowers being punished for their actions has occurred.

In France, two public health officials, both physicians, have been subjected to harsh retribution for speaking out on health issues. Dr. Alain Brailion (rhymes with ‘Ryan’) has been sacked by the regional hospital board of Amiens. Subsequently his firing was upheld by the National Management Centre (equivalent to the Department of Health), despite the fact that 70% of the health officials voted against his dismissal. He was not given the opportunity to be present nor to defend himself at this appeal meeting. Normally, the recommendation by vote of his peers would be adopted, but in his case, the National Management Centre decided that they must be rid of his outspoken views. Brailion has published or spoken publicly on several topics including hepatitis vaccination policy (1), the power of the tobacco lobby (2) and the need to ban benfluorex in France (details in <http://brailion.net/alain/>). This last drug, a derivative of fenfluramine which was banned in 1997 in the USA and elsewhere due to heart valvular problems, was only banned in France in 2009.

His boss, Professor Gérard Dubois, is being sued for libel by the French tobacconist’s union for saying during a television interview that tobacco had killed two persons for every tobacconist in France.

Brailion’s sacking and the libel suit against Prof. Dubois speaks sadly about the apparent gagging of outspoken physicians and failure to protect whistleblowers in France. I suspect that France is not unique amongst so-called “democratic” countries in trying to stifle unpopular or inconvenient views.

The reader may ask why the above is relevant to the world of hepatology. The answer is both direct and indirect. The direct answer is that Dr. Brailion is or was one of us, a hepatologist. For two decades starting in the early 1980’s, while working with Didier Lebrec, he produced many important papers that advanced our knowledge of cardiovascular complications of cirrhosis (3,4). In the mid-1990s he eventually settled into a career in public health.

The indirect and more important reason is that we as part of the global medical/scientific community must always strive to support and protect those individuals amongst us who risk their careers, and in some cases even their lives, to beneficially change the world, either by direct actions or by drawing attention to wrongdoing.

Individuals should be encouraged to act against injustice, or at least speak out against it. In the global community (the electronic ‘global village’ that Marshall McLuhan so presciently predicted five decades ago), the power of the internet or the ‘blogosphere’ can be harnessed to help individuals who try to change the world. To start the new year by such a small gesture, please log on to Brailion’s website and email your support. Let’s make 2012 the Year of the Individual.

### Dedication

This editorial is dedicated to the memory of Mohamed Abouazizi.

Samuel S. Lee  
Editor-in-chief  
*Liver International*

### References

1. Brailion A, Nguyen-Khac E. Pregnancy and hepatitis B in Europe. *Liver Int* 2009; **29**: 1447.
2. Brailion A, Dubois G. Framework convention on tobacco control. In search of outcomes. *Health Policy* 2001; **103**: 98–9.
3. Brailion A, Cales P, Valla D, *et al.* Influence of the degree of liver failure on systemic and splanchnic haemodynamics and on response to propranolol in patients with cirrhosis. *Gut* 1986; **27**: 1204–9.
4. Brailion A, Gaudin C, Poo JL, *et al.* Plasma catecholamines are a reliable index of sympathetic vascular tone in patients with cirrhosis. *Hepatology* 1992; **15**: 58–62.