CORR Insights

CORR Insights®: Do Corresponding Authors Take Responsibility for Their Work? A Covert Survey

Vance W. Berger PhD

Where Are We Now?

There is a social contract, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, governing (to a greater or lesser extent) the interaction between journals and authors. Journals are bound by confidentiality to not divulge what they receive as submitted

manuscripts, judging the research solely on its merits. In return, authors are bound, at least in theory, to (1) conduct their research with integrity and honesty and (2) stand behind their work even after it is published. To a degree, both parties routinely renege on these agreements, to the detriment of the integrity of the research record. But our focus here is on the authors who do not provide real answers, or in some cases, do not even reply at all, when asked about their published research.

With these broken promises as a backdrop, it is clear that we are nowhere close to where we need to be. If taking responsibility for published work is a good thing, and if it is a condition for publication, then how can it be optional? How is it that there are no consequences for authors who do not even have the courtesy to so

much as reply to an honest inquiry about their published work? What use is an agreement to provide a service — such as postpublication followup — if the party making the commitment has no intention to honor it? Ultimately, the medical journal enters into this agreement not on its own behalf, but rather on behalf of its constituency, the patients who rely on the journal to provide useful and valid information. When the journal fails in its obligation to hold authors responsible, the result can quickly devolve into nothing less than a “scandal of poor medical research” [1] in which “most published findings are false” [2]. The patients, real people as opposed to nameless enterprises, are the victims here. In my opinion, this is where we are now.

Where Do We Need To Go?

In a perfect world, researchers would never retire (or die), and so a journal could insist that the obligation placed on a published author continues forever. In reality, this would not be

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V. W. Berger PhD (✉)
Division of Cancer Prevention, National
Institutes of Health, 9609 Medical Center
Drive, Rockville, MD 20850, USA
e-mail: vb78c@nih.gov;
vance917@gmail.com

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possible, and even while authors remain active, they still tend to be rather busy. So they cannot be expected to run additional analyses, for example, every time someone asks for one, especially since competing groups of authors might try to use this method to tie up their competitors with never-ending requests. Still, if a group of authors cares so little for its published work that it will not support it after the fact, then why should anyone else take that work more seriously than the authors? Why should it remain in the published record, where it can continue to influence medical practice even if it is fatally flawed? In fact, it should not. The postpublication obligations should come with consequences for failure to adhere to them. If the authors choose not to support their published article even after the journal does its due diligence and makes sure that the author is still active, the journal should have the authority to retract the study. Going even further, the author should be sanctioned and put on a publicly available list of authors who shirk their

author responsibilities. Journals should not consider future submissions from such authors, since these authors clearly do not take their authorship responsibilities seriously.

How Do We Get There?

No serious analysis of the situation is possible without careful consideration of the perils inherent in allowing authors discretion in deciding to either stand behind their work or dismiss postpublication followup as they deem appropriate. Why do journals routinely ask authors to do so? What would happen if they did not? Clearly, this is an attempt to get authors to “own” their work, to take responsibility for it, so that they will publish only those manuscripts that deserve their unconditional support. That is, this step is designed to ensure that authors are honest and diligent in their work, which is a good thing.

Still, journals need to step back and see the big picture, and their role in it.

Unfortunately, far too often journals function as private playgrounds for certain distinguished authors who are in a position to (1) bring fame to the journal through name recognition, and (2) bring fortune to the journal through a combination of ordering massive numbers of reprints of the articles of their positive studies, commissioning of supplementary issues, and placement of advertisements. Ideally, these journals are supposed to serve the needs of the patients who rely on them for unbiased information. For this to happen, far more comprehensive reform would be required than simply ensuring that authors take their responsibilities seriously. But even this would be a great first step, and would at least get us on the path to where we need to be.

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