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Contemporary Issue

Publish and flourish: Take the road less travelled!

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ABSTRACT

Scientific research and publications are essential for advancement of medical knowledge. The perceived need for 'publications' in medical journals, has increased substantially in view of the recently mandated requirement of original research publications in indexed journals to ensure career progression in academic institutions. There has been an unprecedented rise in the number of standalone journals and publishers, ready to process manuscripts on priority with almost guaranteed publication, at a cost. Many of these publishers have questionable credibility and could be regarded as 'predatory'. It is imperative for a concerted and broad based initiative to foster awareness creation among students at the post-graduate level and for faculty of medical colleges and research institutions. We need to adopt stringent measures to curtail this scourge of predatory publishing. It is advisable for researchers to take the road less travelled, and publish in 'reputed' and 'accepted' journals to flourish. This article aims to bring focus on to the present situation in the scientific publication arena in the Indian context, highlight emerging threats and suggest possible remedies.

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Introduction

Doctors of the modern age are scientists and researchers too, and in Robert Frost's eternal words, sometimes need to take the road less travelled. From a contrarian view point, breaking with the traditional "Publish or Perish" paradigm, doctors need to adapt to the changing dynamics in the professional realm. It is an accepted fact that scientific research and publications are essential for advancement of medical knowledge. With every passing year, the numbers of scientific journals and the body of research publications is increasing. The mandatory requirement established by regulatory bodies, for a specified number of original research publications in indexed journals within a stipulated time frame, to ensure

career progression in academic institutions has become an added pressure on the medical profession.

A reality check on research output by various Indian medical institutions and hospitals has revealed dismal and disturbing facts.¹ Intense, time bound pressure for publications coupled with the relative difficulty in getting research published in reputed journals may possibly lead to fertile hunting grounds for 'predatory publishers'. The desperation for scientific publications amongst the academic medical community, has been mirrored by the unprecedented rise in the number of standalone journals and publishers, who are ready to process manuscripts in the shortest possible time frames with guarantees of publication, in an attractive cost package.

Many of these journals and publishers have questionable credibility and could be regarded as 'predatory', with Beall^{2,3}

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being the among the first in compiling lists of these. Reportedly, this 'whistle blower' of the academic world is possibly being 'harassed' with litigation. This article aims to highlight the present situation in the scientific publication arena particularly in the Indian context, identify emerging threats and suggest possible remedies.

Magnitude of the problem

Responsible editors of medical journals and their conscientious reviewers are mostly concerned about the quality of a research paper submitted to their journal, and aligning it to their readership interests. The ethical issues that are of concern for editors are usually authorship issues, conflicts of interest, plagiarism, duplicate/simultaneous submissions, research fraud, salami slicing etc. As the numbers of scientific publications have increased substantially over the past decade, there is an increasing incidence of research fraud, publication misconduct and retractions.⁴

The academic requirement of scholarly publications in the era of "publish or perish" have led to temptation for research fraud and publication misconduct. In a previous era, "peer review" which was the backbone for quality control for any submitted manuscript, has now been manipulated and hijacked in a few instances.^{5,6} The unprecedented demand for publication avenues and the long processes involved, has led to a growth of the market for publishers of all ethical hues. There are many standalone open access journals with guaranteed publication through purported fast track or even dubious peer review. Many such publishers and journals have been established purely from the commercial exploitation angle of the situation to address the demand and supply mismatch in the medical publishing world. With scepticism, a discerning medical professional should view such unscrupulous agencies as a "publication industry".^{7,8}

The latest 'blacklist' available in early January 2017 gave details of more than a thousand suspected predatory publishers rising from a mere eighteen in the initial list in 2011. (As of now the webpage is offline and may either have been hacked or the author may have been pressured into retreat.) Similarly, the number of suspected standalone predatory journals has risen to more than 1200 in the last 4–5 years.² Although there are differences of opinion amongst certain sections of the scientific community regarding Beall's list, undoubtedly, this listing and constantly updating of potential, possible or probable predatory open access publishers and standalone journals has been worthy of praise.

We believe that the actual scenario is worse than can be gauged from this 'blacklist'. It was perceived earlier that unscrupulous publishers lured unsuspecting and aspiring authors for submitting their manuscripts for publication. However, recent studies have revealed that a sizeable number of the authors published in suspected predatory journals are aware of the fact, and thereby are willing 'conspirators'.^{7,8} Disturbingly, India has the largest concentration of these publishers and is also one of the biggest contributors to journals in the 'suspect' category across all disciplines and institutes.^{7,8} It must be understood by researchers and those desirous of having scientific publications, that a mere

'blacklist' has no real meaning, other than that such journals have been identified as being of suspect quality. Submission for publication being a voluntary process and individual driven, there is no compulsion to publish in any particular journal, blacklisted or otherwise. The 'customer' chooses, and that's where the question of academic discretion arises, in selecting suitable, reputable journals which will enhance and not damage and individuals scientific and academic credentials.

One of the main reasons that can be attributed for publishing in a journal of suspect quality is the sheer desperation of academia to retain their position and ensure career progression.⁸ Although the mandatory requirement of a stipulated number of original research publications is likely to stimulate both the aspiring and the somnolent amongst academicians; there remains a potential fear of increasing scientific fraud to attain the requisite target under all circumstances and at any cost.⁹

Emerging threats

Misleading metrics: It is common for an author/researcher to get his/her email inbox inundated with unsolicited emails on a daily basis from publishers seeking manuscripts for their journal with beguiling package deals. These publishers of standalone journals often display an impressive indexing status of the journal from a number of indexing agencies. Sometimes, even reputed publishers may be seen to be indulging in this practice of exaggerating the indexing status of various professional journals knowing very well the scarcity of authentic indexing agencies in the scientific academia such as Medline.

The issues of 'Impact factor' is another confusing aspect for the already bewildered researcher. Just as for indexing agencies, there are very few reliable agencies calculating accurate impact factors with relevant parameters such as Thomson Reuter. Some unscrupulous publishers make an attempt to mislead potential authors with fake facts and numbers from questionable agencies. Lists are available of such suspected, dubious, self-styled quality control agencies^{2,10} involved in issuing 'impact factors' to journals without rigorous, process driven assessments of that particular journal.

Hijacked journals: Cases of fraudulent websites simulating authentic and reputed journals for luring aspiring authors have also come to light in the recent past. The hijackers, usually cyber criminals, register a domain name and create a website similar to reputed journals for this purpose. These hijacked journals^{2,11} have the potential for identity theft and expose the author to international fraud.

Suggested remedial measures

The most important aspect of any remedial measure to be implemented to address the issue would be for aspiring authors to be involved through awareness creation and sensitization about existence of suspect/predatory publishers/journals. An author should scrutinize the credibility of a

journal before opting for the 'road more travelled' as an easy way out. As the scope for scientific fraud and misconduct has increased, the requirement for editor and reviewers to be more vigilant has also increased. Whatever may be the eventual outcome of any manuscript submission, any paper prepared by an author demands substantial time and effort from an author.

To advise prospective authors, it is recommended to seek long term gain rather than short term 'benefit'. It is wiser to submit to 'reputed' journals with low acceptance rates, than to seek recourse to 'casual publications', which by virtue of their poor peer perceptual ranking will tarnish the long term reputation of the author. An author should not get deceived by misleading metrics displayed by the publishers which have easily discernible scientific credibility.

Although there are guidelines for authors, reviewers, editors and publishers by Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), there is no compulsion for any publisher to follow them. Neither there is any punitive action against anyone who indulges in publication misconduct in any form. In India possibly it is time that regulatory professional bodies have a re-look into existing rules for academic career progression,¹² lest India becomes a world leader in research fraud and predatory publications.

Regulatory bodies may be pressured through public opinion to come up with punitive or deterrent clauses such that if an author is found to have publications in identified predatory journals, and on not being able to furnish a suitable defence for the same to a jury of peers, then academic progression benefit from such a publication would be denied. An insistence on only original articles may again be too stringent. There is a need to give partial recognition to Case Reports, Review Articles and Contemporary Issues too.

Conclusion

The recent upsurge in the number of unscrupulous publishers and journals with solely commercial motives leading to the potential for compromised content quality is a matter of concern for the entire scientific community. It is imperative for a concerted and broad based initiative to foster awareness creation amongst students at the post-graduate level and for faculty of medical colleges and research institutions. We need to adopt stringent measures to curtail this scourge. Take the

road less travelled, and publish in 'reputed' and 'accepted' journals to flourish.

Conflicts of interest

The author has none to declare.

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