Predatory Journals—A Looming Menace

Rishi Mugesh Kanna¹

¹Department of Orthopedics and Spine Surgery, Ganga Hospital, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

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Research and Publication

The word “research” (derived from the French word *recherche*) can be defined as the systematic study of materials and information, to establish facts and reach new conclusions. Research is performed through posing clear questions and adapting standard principles and methods to arrive at answers for the research question. It aims to increase the stock of knowledge, which is then suffused across peers through research publications in peer-reviewed journals.

Since the publication of the first journal in the mid-17th century, the number of journals and publications has increased exponentially. For example, the number of indexed citations added to MEDLINE during each fiscal year is around 800,000. Apart from genuine, intentional, need-based research undertaken by clinical and basic scientists, multiple other reasons including peer pressure, establish professional supremacy, maintaining high academic posts, and staying afloat in demanding academic environments necessitate the young and senior researchers to publish periodically. As the notion “Publish or Perish” gains a stronghold in academia, the need to publish *by any means* looms large on the researchers. This paves the way for various iniquitous methods such as plagiarism, paraphrasing, duplicate publication, salami slicing, falsification, and fabrication of data. The latest entrant in these shady research publication methods is predatory journalism.

Predatory Journals

Predatory journals are journals without a standard editorial board, do not have a proper peer review, and charge exorbitant publication fees from the authors.¹ While there is a long list of criteria to include a journal under this category, these three elements are central to brand a journal as predatory. These journals lure authors to publish their research work under the pretext of a quick review process (which is usually nonexistent) and nominal processing fees. Many of these are open access journals. Such journals thrive on the author fees and add only insignificant, falsified, and unreviewed information to the scientific literature.

Etymology and Criteria of Predatory Journals

Dr Jeffrey Beall, librarian at the University of Colorado, Denver, DO, United States, was the whistle blower of this malice, and he coined the term ‘predatory journals’ to describe publishers in the scholarly publishing business who collect article processing charges and provide rapid publishing without a proper peer-review process. Beall also defined a list of journals (popularly called as the “Beall’s list but later taken off from the web following threats to him) based on several criteria to identify such journals.

Important among Beall’s criteria to identify predatory journals are as follows:

1. No single individual is identified as journal’s editor; no formal editorial board.
2. The editor and review board members do not have academic expertise in the journal’s field.
3. Provides insufficient information about author processing fees
4. No proper indexing in standard databases, such as PubMed, DOAJ, etc.
5. The name of a journal is unrelated with the journal’s mission, or its origin (e.g., a journal with the word ‘European’ in its name, where neither the publisher, nor editor, nor any office relates to Europe).
6. Poorly maintained websites, including misspellings and grammatical errors on the website.
7. Provide minimal or no copyediting or proofreading of submissions.
8. Publish nonacademic papers, such as personal opinions, and polemic descriptions.

The Indian Perspective

Unfortunately, India has become both the source and victim of this malady. Several studies have revealed that India is among the major contributors of articles published in poor-quality predatory journals. In a classic article published in *Nature*, Moher et al had evaluated more than 200 predatory journals and noted that more than half of the corresponding authors

Address for correspondence

Rishi Mugesh Kanna, MS, MRCS FNB,
Ganga Hospital, 313, Mettupalayam
Road, Coimbatore 641 043,
Tamil Nadu, India
(e-mail: rishiortho@gmail.com).

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were from high- and upper-middle-income countries.² The authors studied 1,907 papers and found that 27% of the corresponding authors came from India followed by the United States (15%) and others. It is a blemish for India that young Indian scholars are falling prey to these journals while seasoned professors are either unaware or complicit in this scientific crime.

The reasons for Indian academicians to publish in predatory journals are publication pressure on young researchers to complete their doctorate thesis, achieve yearly academic targets, and qualify for promotions and permanent academic positions. Seethapathy et al studied 3,300 articles from 350 journals randomly chosen from Beall's list.³ They observed that among authors who have published in predatory journals, 90% considered research publication as an achievement, while 73% had academic pressure to publish articles because publication gave them job securities and promotions.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) of India has introduced an Academic Performance Indicator (API) system, wherein a certain number of papers have to be published by a research scholar prior to submission of the doctoral thesis and by the teachers in colleges and universities at the time of their recruitment and assessment for promotion. While this was intended to stimulate an academic drive and promote a research milieu in Indian universities, it has been criticized for creating fertile ground for the growth of fake publications and predatory journals in India.

India also seems to be a safe haven for majority of the predatory journals listed. According to a study by Shamsheer et al, published in 2017, more than a half of predatory publishers in the world are based in India.⁴ Among this notorious list of predatory publishers, firms such as OMICS, Austin, Science domain, IAEME, and IJRDO are based in India, which produce hundreds of open access journals under their aegis. OMICS is currently fighting a legal action against the United States Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for alleged exorbitant publication charges and humongous meeting revenues.

The Way Forward

In the absence of proper control bodies and governmental regulatory rules, predatory journals are likely to thrive more by feeding on gullible young scholars. The way forward appears mired as publishing, which has so far remained a matter of academic excellence and need-based, is slowly being pushed as a mandatory requirement for sustenance and promotion in academic situations. At a larger level, the UGC can periodically check and list the predatory journals in its website so that the scholars are aware. At individual levels, students and young researchers need to be educated on the fallacies of publication and methods to identify predatory journals. The role of quintessential scientific leaders and senior professors in guiding the students toward healthy research and fruitful publication cannot be overemphasized.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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