

Some issues of Ethics in publication of scientific articles

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Academic publishing depends, to a great extent on trust between the three important people. Editors trust the authors to submit a scientific article containing comprehensive, repeatable, evidence based content. The author is supposed to follow certain rigorous exercise to provide the adequate data and should be able to defend the hypothesis. Editors also trust peer reviewers to provide fair assessments. The authors trust editors to select appropriate peer reviewers and readers put their trust in the peer-review process.

There are two more players in this game of publication - the official owners of the Journals - Associations and the publishers who also have different agendas. So Academic publishing also occurs in an environment of powerful intellectual, financial and sometimes other interests that may collide or compete. Hence there is a need for some Good decisions and strong editorial processes designed to manage these interests which can create a sustainable and efficient publishing system which will benefit all the players - academic societies, journal editors, authors, research funders, readers, and publishers. Good publication practices do not develop by chance and will become established only if they are actively promoted.

The responsibility of the authors can not be undermined. The onus lies on the author to be truthful and sincere in the content. The common practices like hiking the number of patients, exaggerating the procedures and copying from other articles should be avoided. It should be remembered that the scientific content should be able to withstand an aggressive discussion and should be defensible. Transparency is the keyword and the author needs to be transparent in all the processes. Authorship is a well earned responsibility but not gifted. All the authors

should have contributed in some way to the publishing process to be included. 'Ghost' (individuals who qualify for authorship but are not listed) or 'Guest' or 'honorary' (individuals who are listed despite not qualifying for authorship such as heads of department not directly involved with research) authors should be avoided. The guidelines for the authorship is provided by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) which defines the authorship that is applicable beyond the medical sector. Funding should be disclosed to the editor and the editor will definitely look for a bias or conflict of interest between the authors and the funding agencies. Even if the results are not satisfactory to the funding agency the article can be published.

Most journals wish to consider only work not published elsewhere. One reason for this is that the scientific literature can be skewed by redundant publication with important consequences. For example, if results are inadvertently included more than once into metaanalyses, it affects the results. Both journal editors and readers have a right to know whether research has been published previously. Multiple publications and republications should be avoided.

Since 2005, some medical journals [notably those edited by members of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)] have made registration in a publicly accessible trial register a requirement for publishing clinical trials. The World Health Organization (WHO), in May 2006, urged 'research institutions and companies to register all medical studies that test treatments on human beings'. ICMJE allowed authors a

grace period for registration of new or ongoing trials; this grace period ended September 2005. WHO states that 'all clinical trials should be registered at inception', i.e. prospectively before patients/subjects are enrolled, using the complete 20 criteria described by its International Clinical Trials Registry Platform. In India too all the clinical trials and research are supposed to be registered with Indian Council of Medical Research.

It has become now mandatory that all the articles submitted to any Journal has to be assessed in a local/Institutional Ethics committee constituted for the purpose. Journals should ask authors to state that the study they are submitting was approved by the relevant research ethics committee or institutional review board. If human participants were involved, manuscripts must be accompanied by a statement that the experiments were undertaken with the understanding and

appropriate informed consent of each. If experimental animals were used, the materials and methods (experimental procedures) section must clearly indicate that appropriate measures were taken to minimize pain or discomfort and details of animal care should be provided. The quality of the articles has also been on the down trend. Publishing a scientific articles is now being thrust on all the faculty members of medical colleges pushing them to a brink to 'publish or perish'. On one hand Medical council of India made it mandatory to publish a minimum number of papers for the next promotion. On the other hand the institutes are enticing the faculty with increments, promotions and financial benefits. The medical journals have also seen a growth with a number of players chipping in. It is not uncommon to receive phone calls from the publishers asking for scientific articles and promise publishing for a fees.

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