Publication in scientific Journals: For whose benefit?

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Let me first thank Prof. Najmul Huda for giving me this opportunity to write the editorial of this issue. I would like to bring to light one of the aspects of publications in medical/scientific journal which we often do not pay any heed to. “Who is ultimately winning or benefitting from the publications that we are doing in scientific and medical journals?”

With ever increasing importance of publications for getting a better job, academic promotions and even to market oneself as an expert of a particular field, the competition to publish has grown tremendously in the last few years. The phrase “Publish or Perish” has become a topic in several conferences and CMEs. Competition has risen to a point where getting it done at all costs- by hook or by crook- is becoming the norm. Medical publications have become a market or rather an industry in itself where most of the laws of economics like those of demand and supply work. Looking from a business mindset, broadly speaking, 4 class of people benefit from the medical publications:-

(a) Authors/Researchers- in the form of better career opportunities and getting a sense of satisfaction and entitlement.
(b) Publishers- giving a platform for the researchers to help in the advancement of science, creating employment opportunities for many people involved in publishing the journal.
(c) Funding agencies- Doing a research requires money, which may come directly from the investigators or in the form of research grants in universities or there may be specific private or government funding agencies. One funding the project or study may later patent the new technique/ drug/ implant and start its commercial production. It may also improve ranking of the concerned educational institutions.
(d) Common people or patients- who are directly or indirectly affected by the new discoveries in the healthcare sector by getting better care and treatment.

Warren Buffet, one of the most rich and great philanthropist once remarked, “Honesty is a very expensive gift. Do not expect it from cheap people.” Let us see how dishonesty has crept into each of these four group of people. Examples of personal and professional misconduct are numerous but for here, I would just like to uncover ‘tip of the iceberg’.

Medical researchers may fabricate, falsify or indulge in plagiarism[1]. These are the unethical and short-cut routes to getting a paper published. In first metaanalysis of surveys regarding research misconduct, around 2% of scientists selfadmitted to have done fabrication, falsification or modification of data or results at least once and up to 33.7% admitted other questionable research practices. Surveys which asked about such indulgence in malpractices by their colleagues, the data were 14% and 72% respectively, which are nevertheless staggering figures[2]. One may benefit from indulging in such practices in the short run but eventually it is not going to help in advancement of science and may bias the decision making by the clinicians in the wrong direction.

On the publishers front, numerous predatory journals have come about. They are doing it just for the sake of money. The authors get publications under their name and the journal people right from editor to the printer get money for it, although in a wrong way. Most often, they are non-peer reviewed. A study by Yan et al published in Journal of Bone and Joint surgery highlights the issue of orthopaedic predatory publishing. They have gone to the extent of saying that possibly predatory orthopaedic journals outnumber legitimate ones[3].

In an often cited article to highlight the nexus of funding agencies and researchers titled “Conflict of interest in the assessment of thromboprophylaxis after total joint arthroplasty: a systematic review”, Lee et al found most of the studies on thromboprophylaxis after total joint arthroplasty to be sponsored by the industry and that conclusions in most of them favouring the use of the sponsored prophylactic agent[4].

Unfortunately, at the receiving end of all these unethical practices are the common masses and patients. This group
has to bear it all - viz the cost of treatment, wrong or poorly validated treatment methods, side effects that were voluntarily never documented earlier, etc. The use of rhBMP-2 for spinal fusions is a case to be remembered. Initially, in all the studies that were industry sponsored, no adverse events were reported. Later, however, complications in the form of early infection, delayed infection, implant displacement, subsidence, reoperation, and urogenital complications ranged from 10 to 50% depending on surgical approach and anatomic location of use[5].

Several steps have already been taken to prevent such frauds and punish the ones indulging in such activities. Retracting the manuscript, identifying and blacklisting the predatory journals are some of the steps already taken. It would not be an exaggeration if such people who knowingly and deliberately indulge in such malpractices are called ‘thieves’. George Bernard Shaw in a vein of satire said “Thief is not the one who steals, but the one that is caught.” Those who are getting caught are very few compared to the actual number. Such people are all around us. Its high time we remember “The Hippocratic Oath” and introspect in this matter. In my opinion, as a researcher/author, we must ask ourselves few questions before submitting a manuscript? Had I been honest in my research? Is it going to add something to science? Is it going to affect those on whom this research will be directly or indirectly applied in the right manner? Eventually, it should be this world in general and ‘The Human Mankind’ in particular which should benefit from the publication in scientific journals.

References

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