Unethical publication practices: How should we deal with them?

Most editors of medical journals in India are part-time, honorary editors who juggle an academic schedule, clinical practice, research projects, administrative work, responsibilities of a spouse/family and the work related to their journal. A good majority of them are committed individuals who sincerely try to help authors publish their scientific work. However, every now and then they undergo a test of fire, a trial which makes them question themselves whether it is worth all the trouble they take on behalf of the journal. I have just been put through this harrowing test and would like to share with our readers the bitter taste which continues to linger.

A manuscript entitled “Neurochemical, electrophysiological and pharmacological profiles of the selective inhibitor of the glycine transporter-1 SS504734, a potential new type of antipsychotic” was recently submitted via the online submission system and was sent by us to a reviewer. The manuscript bounced back quickly with a comment that the paper had already appeared in some other journal. The authors had copied the article verbatim from Neuropsychopharmacology 2005 Nov;30(11):1963-85 and replaced the authors’ names with theirs.

My efforts to contact the last author over phone proved futile as no such person is/was working in the institute (India) to which he is purportedly affiliated. The second and the third authors’ names could not be found on the website of the institute located in the UK. The corresponding author (first author) claiming to be working in the USA in a research organization has the audacity to mail me that the co-authors have left their institute and their whereabouts could not be traced. When I asked him, how he could have obtained their signatures on the declaration form which he sent via email, he stopped corresponding with me. Though we could locate his institute on the web, very little information was available on it. There was no contact email of the institute available. What should I do? As an editor it is not enough for me to simply reject the manuscript, since I am morally obliged to pursue this obvious case of scientific misconduct and besides the author may simply submit the manuscript to another journal which may not be as discerning. But how much time, energy, effort and money should I spend on a case like this? Time and effort which could certainly be spent in more satisfying and fulfilling ways.

Authors may not realize that even finding a right referee for a manuscript at times proves difficult. The most suitable reviewer may already have another manuscript with him/her; the chosen reviewer may not agree to review the manuscript for lack of time, expertise etc., the paper may be in an area where very few experts are on our referee list and so on. Sometimes emails are sent asking for consent from someone whose name has been found through internet/Pubmed. Occasionally this does not work if no reply is received. At times I ask the editorial board members to suggest referees. After all this hassle to just choose the most appropriate referees, when I get back a manuscript with the comment that the paper is fraudulent, I am ready to lose faith in humanity.

At any given time, I have on my table at least five files suspected to have violated the ethics of publication. Manuscripts with redundant data (published elsewhere), suspicious data, plagiarized content either in part or full, multiple submissions and authorship problems are the common ones we come across. What should a journal do when it encounters such unethical behaviors? The Uniform Requirements (by ICMJE) says “If substantial doubts arise about the honesty or integrity of work, either submitted or published, it is the editor’s responsibility to ensure that the question is appropriately pursued, usually by the authors’ sponsoring institution. However, it is not ordinarily the task of editors to conduct a full investigation or to make a determination; that responsibility lies with the institution where the work was done or with the funding agency. The editor should be promptly informed of the final decision, and if a fraudulent paper has been published, the journal must print a retraction. If this method of investigation does not result in a satisfactory conclusion, the editor may choose to conduct his or her own investigation. As an alternative to retraction, the editor may choose to publish an expression of concern about aspects of the conduct or integrity of the work.” [1]

We assume that authors are reporting work based on honest observations. Suspecting each and every manuscript is abhorrent to us. IJP, with an understaffed office and overworked editors is simply not equipped to police the authors. In a few cases in the past, we had written to the head of the Institute and the head of the department asking for clarifications. To our dismay, we never received any reply. In one case where the data were suspect, we asked the corresponding author to submit the raw data. He promptly replied saying that he would like to withdraw his manuscript! The guilt of authors is difficult to prove except in a few cases of outright fraud such as the one mentioned above. To offer proof, extensive investigation is needed which takes time and effort. With meager resources it is impossible to take many cases to their logical conclusion. At least that was our experience.

What should we do then? Should we let unscrupulous authors have a field day while we sit and watch helplessly? All we can do is to try and educate the authors. We have published a few editorials on plagiarism and abuse of authorship. [2,3,4,5]
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The 'instructions to authors’ is very clear about unethical publication practices. Whenever we are approached, the IJP team has conducted workshops on scientific publication. It is difficult to believe authors are still not aware of the ethics of publication as they claim when they are caught.

Almost all cases of scientific misconduct have been brought to our notice by alert reviewers. This underlines the role of peer reviewers for a journal like IJP and the need for good, alert reviewers. Though we have hundreds of reviewers on our list, we feel the pinch very often since the number of submissions is increasing every year and we do not have sufficient reviewers to fulfill the demand. If you are not already on our list of reviewers and would be willing to serve as one please email me. You would be doing a service to the IJP specifically and science at large. We would also like to know your opinion on how we should deal with unethical contributors. Your opinion would help us decide on a new course of action.

References


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