Letter to the Editor - Predatory Journals: Bad for All But Especially Authors from Low and Middle Income Countries

Carta ao Editor - Predatory Journals: Prejudiciais para os Autores de Países de Baixo e Médio Rendimento

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In this issue, Joana Revés and colleagues describe the rapid growth in so-called predatory journals (fake or fraudulent journals offering publication for payment without peer review or publishing services) and advise students on how to avoid the trap of publishing in them. Predatory journals are a blight on science, and something needs to be done to curtail these unethical publishers.

I became aware of predatory journals in 2014 while working in Bangladesh with scientists and doctors to enhance their capacity for writing and publishing in journals. The scientists and doctors were doing important global health research that needed to be disseminated, but some of their studies were being published in predatory journals. It is perhaps unsurprising that these relatively inexperienced researchers working in less developed research environments in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) are easy targets for the phishing emails that come from predatory publishers asking for submissions. I subsequently wrote two blogs in BMJ sharing my experience and offering tips on how to avoid predatory journals and co-wrote an editorial highlighting the problem and arguing that LMIC researchers and institutions are disproportionately affected.

Since then we have come to understand much more about predatory publishing, which is now estimated to have an annual income of $75 million.

David Moher and colleagues scrutinised over 200 biomedical predatory journals and found that they included data from more than 2 million individuals and 8000 animals.
keen to see disseminated. For LMIC scientists, this has meant increasing pressure to publish their research to meet dissemination goals, receive credit for promotion and career advancement, and attract new research funding. In some ways the rise of global health has amounted to a (contemporary) process of research and institutional ‘development’ in LMICs that mimics the historical one of high-income country institutions.

But in choosing journals, LMIC authors are likely to have far less training, mentorship, and support than those in high income countries to discern the legitimacy of available journals. With relatively less developed institutional structures (little or no formal training in writing and publishing, no in-house publication officers etc.), there is also less accountability for journal choices. Furthermore, while international funders and donors have vastly increased their financial support of LMIC institutions and expectations of research dissemination, they have not increased their governance and oversight of publications. In my experience, funders require progress reports but delight most at long publication lists, and have few if any rules about publishing.

The lack of mentorship, training, and accountability around publication that gives rise to research being ‘lost’ in predatory journals is a failure of institutions, and I agree this is worsened for LMIC researchers whose institutions – academic or otherwise - are relatively less developed.

If we can’t look to institutions and funders, can we count on collaborators from high income countries to provide mentorship and support of their colleagues in LMICs to ensure the research is being published in the best journals? Possibly not. First, researchers in high income countries to discern the legitimacy of available journals. With relatively less developed institutional structures (little or no formal training in writing and publishing, no in-house publication officers etc.), there is also less accountability for journal choices. Furthermore, while international funders and donors have vastly increased their financial support of LMIC institutions and expectations of research dissemination, they have not increased their governance and oversight of publications. In my experience, funders require progress reports but delight most at long publication lists, and have few if any rules about publishing.

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