

Editorial

Predators and hijackers in academic publishing

A theme that has recently received increasing attention in medical publishing is predatory journals. The problem became pronounced two years ago, when spams of this kind in mailboxes of scientists increased considerably. Jeffrey Beall first used the term (1) for fake journals that send emails offering open access publication in exchange for payment (2). One of the key victims are authors who submit an article, pay for a fake publication, and lose the chance of having the article published elsewhere. The second victims are the editors who are afraid to lose their reputation by being hijacked. The third victim, which is collateral damage in this process, is the scientific community, which loses its credibility.

HOW DOES IT LOOK IN PRACTICE? A TRUE STORY

A young and inexperienced researcher from a country with less tradition in scientific publishing has presented a part of her Ph.D. at an international conference. The comments from colleagues were encouraging. A few weeks after the conference she receives an email, inviting her to submit an article to an open access journal. The name of the journal is similar to a name of an existing and respected journal. The author checks the website, which is well organized. If she had checked the claims of the impact factor and the ISSN number, she would have realized that they are false. The address of the editorial office is not available or is also fraudulent. The editorial board of the journal is impressive. Some of them are very well-known scientists. Most of them do not know they are listed as members of the board; some have accepted in good faith, without properly checking what kind of journal they are supporting. The editorial board may also include names of unknown experts with impressive titles, which usually belong to fake scientists. The letter the author sometimes receives includes the name of a respected scientist, who is working in the same field.

The young researcher optimistically follows the procedure of submission. The editorial process goes smoothly, which is a pleasant surprise: reviewers suggest only minor corrections, which makes the young author



confident about the quality of the work. Finally, the aspiring young scientist receives a letter that the article has been accepted for publication. She is proud of another major step in her academic career. The letter also includes a paragraph, explaining that a publication fee is required to have the article published. The fee has not been announced before, but the researcher believes that not enough attention has been paid when reading the instructions for authors. The publication fees must be paid in a short period (usually within a few days). No invoice is sent. Payment is made online to a bank account, using a credit card.

When the young researcher proudly announces her publication to the librarian, the librarian informs the author that the article does not have a doi number and it can therefore not be accepted in the bibliography. A long correspondence with the editorial office follows. After many emails requesting this information from the journal the young author receives numerous answers of the same kind ('The article will be published in the next issue.'). and she finally realizes that she has been the victim of a hoax. She tries at least to salvage the article, knowing that after publication she loses the chance of publishing it in a respectable journal, which is a requirement for her Ph.D. thesis. Her emails are not answered, and the article appears on the website of the journal.

The young author realizes in shock that even the supposedly safe arena of academia is not exempt

from fraud and is ashamed of being taken for a fool. This lesson has cost them not only the money, but the article as well.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The example described above is a young researcher's nightmare but, unfortunately, may become increasingly frequent.

Researchers should be aware that this problem exists (3). It is always useful to check whether the journal is on Beall's list, whether it is listed in the directory of open access journals (DOAJ) and whether the publisher is a member of recognized professional organizations subscribing to best practices in publishing as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE); the International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers (STM) or the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA). The authors should check whether the journal is indexed in Web of Science or if it appears on PubMed. They should be careful to check whether the title is the same, since hijacking a name of a well-established journal is common. Of course, the editorial process must be transparent (4). Another important measure is to ask an experienced researcher for advice.

There is a need for caution by experienced academics, who should be careful not to agree to serve as members of an editorial board of a journal they have never heard

of. You may never be able to resign and your name will be used fraudulently.

The European Journal of General Practice has taken a decision to move towards an open access strategy of publication. We believe this is a wise decision, which will enable us to be more available to all doctors throughout the world. We are also aware that this may make us vulnerable to some undesired actions that can happen only on the Internet.

REFERENCES

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