

Is publication ethics becoming a casualty of Covid-19?

Published online first on September 2, 2020. DOI:10.20529/IJME.2020.092

Keywords: Publication ethics, Covid-19, research integrity, editorial ethics

Public health emergencies require real-time, accurate information to guide effective and timely responses. This calls for rapid and timely publication of information to promote both its scientific validity and societal value. On the other hand, rapid publication poses a potential threat to the integrity of the information published. Inaccurate or incomplete information arises due to the difficulty in conducting rigorous studies during an ongoing emergency, and the race for the fame and prestige that come with being first. The balance between the potential risks and benefits of rapid publication can be achieved by adhering to the principles of publication ethics that promote the integrity, accuracy and value of scientific literature (1). We highlight ten potential challenges related to scientific publishing and dissemination of information during this pandemic, and the underlying principles of publication ethics that could guide us.

- There is a race among journals to quickly publish Covid-19 related papers, and thereby draw more citations and improve their impact factor. Journals have adopted fast-track review for Covid-19 papers where reviewers have volunteered to process these papers faster, and even come up with special Covid-19 issues. The fast-track process, circumventing the traditional, more time consuming peer-review has led to a number of retractions, even from some of the most prestigious journals such as the *Lancet* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*, damaging their reputations (2, 3). Scientific validity can only be ensured through rigorous peer review. There should be no shortcuts here. Quality reviews take some time, but preserving ethics in publication is non-negotiable.
- Many unscrutinised Covid-19 related papers have been published online on preprint servers such as medRxiv, bioRxiv. But we must exercise caution while citing these papers and drawing conclusions based on them. Numerous papers related to Covid-19 do cite preprint materials. Rather than completely discouraging citation of these preprints, it must be explicitly stated that these are non-peer reviewed and should be interpreted with caution.
- Transparency is most crucial during public health emergencies. This is required in terms of disclosure of sources of funding and other potential conflicts of interest, explicitly stating the limitations of the data and the study, process of peer review and review reports. The editor and team are entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out a thorough check before anything goes out into the public domain.
- Data availability in the public domain is much debated. The two recent retractions from the *Lancet* and *NEJM* also involved doubts regarding the veracity of the data (2,3). We strongly recommend that clinical data (unlinked anonymous data) should be made available in the public domain for the research community to access, analyse and provide useful insights. Editors must ensure that researchers make a firm commitment to make the data publicly available as a pre-requisite for publishing an article.
- Political interference in science has a detrimental effect on publication ethics. Some journals retracted papers on Covid-19 without convincing reasons (4). Some of these papers were published in Chinese journals and questioned crucial issues with important ramifications (4,5). Did government pressure trigger retractions of these provocative papers? A paper from *Nature* indicates that there is indeed a Chinese attempt to control Covid-19 related information (6).
- Editors and reviewers have to be very careful about the recommendations these papers make. A recent study evaluating hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin as a treatment option for Covid-19 recommended treatment of patients with this combination (7). However, with lots of methodological biases, the study went too far in recommending the treatment. This study received undue attention and had a far reaching impact on clinical practice worldwide, which raises concerns.
- As researchers, we have the important role of promoting ethics in publishing. The role of editors becomes difficult when researchers themselves have something to hide and resort to fraudulent practices. We should share our work on social and other media responsibly, with professionalism and transparency. As reviewers and readers, we should also be vigilant in identifying dishonest practices and flawed interpretations by overzealous, negligent or unethical researchers.
- Editors are under pressure to make rapid decisions about the Covid-19 papers they receive. But they should stay true to their editorial policies, maintain high standards of peer review and transparency while being aware of their public health responsibilities. Any amendment to the usual procedures should be declared in published papers as an editorial note and also be stated on the journal's website.
- As we look for new treatments to tackle this novel virus, the pharma sector lobby is a strong influence and can impact decision making by undue interference. This demands vigilance not only from editors, but also the media and the entire researcher fraternity.
- It is crucial for journals not to be biased by the findings of a study, and to focus on its methodology and the veracity of its findings. Journals should refrain from being politicised or

polarised and strive towards scientific rigour.

To conclude, although it is very important for the academic fraternity to continue publishing in high impact journals, we believe that the scientific rigour of such papers should not be compromised during the pandemic because the implications in terms of impact on public health decision making are huge. We are shortly going to witness a similar race to publish the results of vaccine trials and the exercise of undue influence by vaccine manufacturers and other stakeholders. We need to put publication ethics at the forefront for the greater good of the community. If we buckle down, science loses.

Conflict of interest and funding: None declared

Jaya Prasad Tripathy (ijay.doc@gmail.com), Department of Community Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Nagpur, Maharashtra INDIA

References

1. Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Code of conduct and best practice guidelines for journal editors. date unknown[cited 2020 June 8]. Available from: http://publicationethics.org/files/Code_of_conduct_for_journal_editors_Mar11.pdf
2. Mehra MR, Desai SS, Kuy SR, Henry TD, Patel AN. Retraction: Cardiovascular disease, drug therapy, and mortality in Covid-19. *N Engl J Med*. 2020 Jun 25;382:2582
3. Mehra MR, Ruschitzka F, Patel AN (2020) Retraction —Hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine with or without a macrolide for treatment of COVID-19: a multinational registry analysis.. *Lancet*. 2020 Jun 13;395(10240):1820. Epub 2020 Jun 5.
4. Agoramoorthy G, Hsu MJ, Shieh P (2020) Queries on the COVID-19 quick publishing ethics. *Bioethics*. 2020 Jun 1;34:633–4. Doi:10.1111/bioe.12772. Epub ahead of print.
5. Retraction Watch. Retracted coronavirus (COVID-19) papers. 2020 [cited 2020 Aug 7]. Available from: <https://retractionwatch.com/retracted-coronavirus-covid-19-papers/>.
6. Silver A, Cyranoski D (2020) China is tightening its grip on coronavirus research. *Nature*. 2020 Apr 15; 580:439–440. Doi:10.1038/d41586-020-01108-y
7. Gautret P, Lagier JC, Parola P, Hoang VT, Meddeb L, Mailhe M, et al (2020) Hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin as a treatment of COVID-19: results of an open-label non-randomized clinical trial. *Int J Antimicrob Agents* 2020 Jul;56:105949, Doi: 10.1016/j.ijantimicag.2020.105949. Epub 2020 Mar 20.

APPEAL FOR DONATIONS TO THE FORUM FOR MEDICAL ETHICS SOCIETY

The Forum for Medical Ethics Society (FMES), publisher of the Indian Journal of Medical Ethics (IJME), appeals to subscribers, contributors, readers, supporters and well-wishers of IJME and FMES to donate to its corpus and towards the publication of IJME. Contributions from both individuals and institutions are welcome.

FMES has published the journal on a shoestring budget, without a break, since 1993. The journal is known for being open access and spearheading discourse aimed at advancing social justice in health and ethics-centred healthcare and health research reform. It is recognised widely as an authoritative resource of knowledge in bioethics and allied areas of enquiry. FMES and IJME have not only sustained themselves but have grown over these past 25 years. Our ever-growing base of readers, contributors, and reviewers enables the publication of multiple and diverse perspectives on wide-ranging topical areas. We have also striven to upgrade the journal technically to keep up with the advances in publishing to widen our reach. This has been possible only because of your steadfast and sustained support.

We are committed to maintaining our editorial independence which is critical to safeguarding the scientific integrity of what we publish. Therefore, wider support from all those who are committed to social justice in health is essential.

FMES is registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 (Reg No: Mumbai-218-1995-G.B.B.D.D) and the Bombay Public Trusts Act, 1950 (Reg No: F-17441 Mumbai, 1995), and donations are eligible for tax exemption under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act, 1961

For more details on how to support us, write to admin@ijme.in or visit our website www.ijme.in/subscribe-support/

**SUPPORT OPEN-ACCESS ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS,
DONATE TO THE FMES CORPUS FOR THE PUBLICATION OF IJME!**