

EDITORIALS

Firm action needed on predatory journals

They're harming researchers in low and middle income countries most, but everyone must fight back

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The rapid rise of predatory journals—publications taking large fees without providing robust editorial or publishing services—has created what some have called an age of academic racketeering.¹ Predatory journals recruit articles through aggressive marketing and spam emails, promising quick review and open access publication for a price. There is little if any quality control and virtually no transparency about processes and fees. Their motive is financial gain, and they are corrupting the communication of science. Their main victims are institutions and researchers in low and middle income countries, and the time has come to act rather than simply to decry them.

Unfortunately, predatory publishing is often confused with open access publishing, whereby studies are free to all and can be reused for many purposes. Legitimate open access publishing—which has widely benefited scientific communication—uses all the professional and ethical practices associated with the best science publishing. Predatory publishing upholds few if any of the best practices yet demands payment for publishing. Under traditional models of publishing librarians were sophisticated purchasers of subscriptions, but in this new model many individual researchers are unable to distinguish between reputable and predatory publishers. The Committee on Publication Ethics and others offer advice.²

The term predatory journals was coined by Jeffrey Beall at the University of Colorado, who maintains a “Beall’s list” of offenders.³ According to Beall, the number of predatory publishers has risen from 18 in 2011 to nearly 700 in 2015.³ Most are in low and middle income countries, particularly India, Pakistan, and Nigeria, although they often claim addresses in the US or UK.⁴ The names of the journals are not easily distinguished from those of the 20 000 or so genuine journals.

Each week, academic authors receive several email requests to publish in these journals, review for them, or join their editorial boards. Most researchers will simply delete the emails, but some fall victim to them. A recent analysis of the authors of articles in biomedical journals found that authors in predatory journals are more likely to be junior and based in developing countries, especially South Asia, compared with authors of articles in

reputable open access journals.⁴ This is unsurprising because authors in low and middle income countries are under the same pressure to publish as those in high income countries but often lack the guidance, support, and mentorship that is available in more developed countries. Ironically, cost poses little barrier as predatory publishers usually charge “low enough” fees, and many developing country organisations are externally funded by donors who require research to be published in open access journals.

Lost science

Articles in predatory journals, although publicly available through internet searches, are not indexed in reputable library systems. The articles are not discoverable through standard searches, and experienced readers and systematic reviewers will be wary of citing anything from these journals. The research is thus lost. Discoverability is important to raise the visibility of the work of developing country institutions and the often neglected problems of the south. It’s also important for funders expecting return on their investment in research.

Predatory publishers are thus undermining the core business of generating evidence to improve global health. The journals also pollute the evidence base on which clinical practice and public health policy depend, and, as Beall points out,⁵ the weak or absent review systems mean that predatory journals can be “reservoirs of author misconduct,” including plagiarism, falsified data, and image manipulation.

United action

Defeating the predatory publishers will not be easy. As long as they can make money they will continue, and if responses to their emails decline they will simply increase the number of emails they send. They may not be doing anything illegal, and even if they are a legal response seems unlikely to succeed.

Action therefore needs to be on the demand side. The first step is to raise awareness of the problem, and reputable publishers and journals have a role: all journals should publish something on the problem. So far few have published anything. Beall’s

list is helpful, but keeping it up to date is difficult: predatory journals are increasing rapidly, and some exist for only a few weeks.⁴ Furthermore, his list doesn't include some new and weak publishers who don't meet his criteria but are nevertheless questionable. Predatory publishers unsurprisingly are working to discredit Beall's list, and many legitimate open access publishers have raised concerns about his stance against open access publishing in general.^{6 7} There is a helpful list of reputable open access journals, the Directory of Open Access Journals, but unfortunately this is not fail safe either.

The lists are important, but the main response must lie with the researchers and their institutions, supported by their partners and donors. Research institutions in low and middle income countries must improve the oversight, training, and mentorship needed to optimise publication literacy, especially among junior researchers. They must establish clear guidance and requirements for publishing research in legitimate journals. Researchers should probably be required to clear with a central body the journal they plan to submit to, and they should be allowed to submit only to journals that are reputable.

Predatory journals are yet another problem that disproportionately harms people in low and middle income countries, and the response will rest primarily with institutions in those countries. But it's important that funders, scientific societies, and reputable publishers in high income countries offer full support.

Competing interests: We have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and declare the following interests: RS is the chair of the oversight committee of the Cochrane Library, which could be damaged by predatory publishing. He's also the recipient of a pension from the BMA, which owns *The BMJ*, which might be damaged by predatory publishing. JC is employed by and RS chairs the board of trustees of icddr,b, which has been and might be further harmed by predatory publishing.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed

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