

Queries on the COVID-19 quick publishing ethics

The Editorial titled "COVID19: Why justice and transparency in hospital triage policies are paramount" by Schuklenk, which appeared in *Bioethics*, is striking, as it features the importance of honesty and openness in research ethics.¹ Ethics, of course, is an integral part of research, and publication ethics is even more crucial to sustain the quality of scientific output.

Critics, however, argue that publication ethics in general generates less attention than research ethics.² This is echoed in the quick publications targeting COVID-19 lately, with an open research dataset showing 24,000 papers in March 2020.³ A quick search of the catch phrase "coronavirus" in the academically-recognized Web of Science database from 1 January to 3 May 2020 has yielded 1257 papers, including 613 feature articles, 293 editorials, 302 early access papers, 126 reviews, 105 news items, 103 letters, 16 corrections, and three others (one data paper, one proceedings paper and one reprint).⁴ The papers cover 83 diverse research areas that range from infectious diseases to religion and from medicine to sports science.

Scientists are aware of the fact that preparing papers for publication in quality journals is a time-consuming affair. But to meet the high demand for COVID-19 articles, some journals have adopted a shortcut through fast-track review where reviewers have volunteered to review submitted COVID-19 papers faster than other submissions. Even the Editor-in-Chief of the Lancet group of journals has admitted to having increased staffing capacity to make editorial decisions on whether submitted papers are prima facie worthy of peer review.⁵ The question arises whether the focus on quick turnaround times and on quick publishing could lead to more faulty publications, and lower quality? For instance, an article from China, requesting medical assistance to fight the COVID-19, was published in *Lancet Global Health* on 24 February 2020, but was quickly retracted a mere two days later.⁶ What was the cause of the hasty retraction?

When the article came out, readers found out that the authors were not part of the frontline medical team to tackle the COVID-19

in Wuhan (China) and the faulty information raised reasonable doubts for retraction.⁶ But, how did the prestigious Lancet group fail to authenticate authors at the outset? Only an inside story may reveal the mystery. Likewise, other papers that described the epidemiological, clinical and bio-structural aspects of COVID-19 were withdrawn after they were uploaded online to the preprint server, bioRxiv.⁷ Retractions normally take time, because journals have to launch lengthy inquiries to investigate the problem, as is exemplified in one reported case where *The Lancet* took 12 years to retract a paper.⁸ The problem, however, is that many scientific writers often read mainly published articles and not retraction notices from journals. So the retracted papers go on to be read and cited by many scientists worldwide across journals for years, showing the actual reality that they do not die out easily.⁹ Therefore, journals would be well advised to spend more time in the peer review process, in order to enhance publication ethics.

Surprisingly, some journals have retracted papers on COVID-19 recently without citing reasons, which is ethically even more problematic. For example, an article on the epidemiology of COVID-19 appeared in *Practical Preventive Medicine* (published from China) in early March 2020, and was retracted after few weeks.¹⁰ The article highlighted how coronavirus could float in the air and spread inside air-conditioned buses. The media covered the sensational news that alarmed the users of the transport system. Another article on false-positive SARS-Cov-2 test results appeared in the *Chinese Journal of Epidemiology* on 5 March 2020. It was retracted after a few days. The paper questioned the quality of existing testing kits, a politically sensitive subject. Recently, India reportedly canceled an order of over half a million COVID-19 testing kits from China after scientists found them to be faulty (www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52451455).

Did government pressure trigger retractions of provocative papers that questioned China's transparency on COVID-19? Evidence from *Nature* news indicates that China indeed controls the country's researchers' COVID-19 research output. That

¹Schuklenk, U. (2020). COVID19: Why justice and transparency in hospital triage policies are paramount. *Bioethics*, 1 April 2020. doi.org/10.1111/bioe.12744.

²Sismondo, S., & Doucet, M. (2010). Publication ethics and the ghost management of medical publication. *Bioethics*, 24, 273–283.

³Hao, K. (2020). Over 24,000 coronavirus research papers are now available in one place. Retrieved from: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/03/16/905290/coronavirus-24000-research-papers-available-open-data/>.

⁴Web of Science. <http://apps.webofknowledge.com>.

⁵Kelland, K. (2020). Speed science: The risks of swiftly spreading coronavirus research. *Physician's Weekly*. Retrieved from: <https://www.physiciansweekly.com/speed-science-the-risks>.

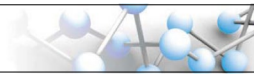
⁶The Editors of *Lancet Global Health*, 2020. Retraction—Chinese medical staff request international medical assistance in fighting against COVID-19. Retrieved from: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30076-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30076-0/fulltext).

⁷Retraction Watch, 2020. Retracted coronavirus (COVID-19) papers. Retrieved from: <https://retractionwatch.com/retracted-coronavirus-covid-19-papers/>.

⁸Eggertson, L. (2010). Lancet retracts 12-year-old article linking autism to MMR vaccines. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 182(4), E199–E200.

⁹Unger, K., & Couzin, J. (2006). Even retracted papers endure. *Science*, 312(5770), 40–41.

¹⁰Ibid; Retraction Watch, 2020. Retracted coronavirus (COVID-19) papers. Retrieved from: <https://retractionwatch.com/retracted-coronavirus-covid-19-papers/>.



endeavor is supported by some who believe it may improve publication quality, while others fear that it may lead to the control of scientific data, the limitation of freedom of academic expressions and that ultimately it constitutes an interference with academic research that is disconcerting from a publishing ethics perspective (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01108-y>). In any case, scientists should focus their attention on ethically conducted research, not on politics.¹¹ Political interference in science in any nation nevertheless will have a detrimental effect on publication ethics.

The fast-track review of COVID-19 papers seems to circumvent the traditional, more time-consuming review process. Some of the retracted papers mentioned earlier suffered as a result of this. It is therefore time to remember that publication ethics is central to scientific integrity and journals need to scrutinize the quality and content of each submission by appropriate subject expert. There should be no shortcuts aimed at accelerating the procedure. Even if quality reviews take more time, preserving the essential norms in publishing ethics must be non-negotiable. This responsibility should be taken seriously by scientists, journals and

publishers, despite the pressures to publish, especially during a pandemic.

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¹¹Hsu, M. J., & Agoramoorthy, G. (2004). . Scientists and teachers should ignore politics. *Nature*, 431, 627.