

Experiences of unethical practices in a leading Pakistani biomedical journal

Aims: To study the major problems on ethics encountered in the last five years (2008-2012) related to, authorships issues, duplicate publication and plagiarism, by the Journal of Pakistan Medical Association, a leading publication and the first PubMed indexed biomedical journal of the country.

Methods: The files related to the topics being studied were identified, all correspondence reviewed and a flow chart made to note the final outcome of each case.

Results: There were seven authorship issues, three duplicate publications and two cases of major plagiarism. Authorship issues: These included six articles all having the supervisor as the first author, followed by a list of student's names. They were all student projects based on simple, descriptive, questionnaire based studies. On enquiry, no justification could be provided for the authorship criteria. Off-the-record, the students were coerced and warned of dire consequences if they did not agree to the order of authors. Further correspondence and questioning, lead to withdrawal of articles. The research department and the vice-chancellor of the university were contacted for the institution's authorship policy, with no response. A web search in January 2013 showed that two of these articles had been published in an on-line journal in the second half of 2012. In one article, the names of two senior faculty members were further added, and the name of four students removed. In another article, three faculty member names had been added and a few students names removed. The seventh case was an article authored by three residents who requested to add the name of the college principal after the acceptance letter was sent. Refusal to do so caused article to be withdrawn. Duplicate publication :The authors of two articles, submitted to JPMA, on further correspondence regarding revision, all within a month, replied that the article was published elsewhere. Obviously the manuscript had been submitted earlier to another journal and later to JPMA Article published in 2000 and later again in 2002 in JPMA. Case detected in 2010. The author was contacted but no convincing explanation could be obtained. Article retracted and concerned university Dean informed. Plagiarism: Case Report copied in Toto from a journal website, detected by reviewer. Rejected Second case : Author was detected of plagiarism by another local journal. As a punishment by the higher authorities, was asked to withdraw all his submissions from all national journals. Author accepted his folly and withdrew all three articles from JPMA.

Conclusion: JPMA encounters unethical conduct of authors which are attributed to language barrier or lack of command on the English language, students and faculty being under pressure to publish for promotion, and sometimes greed for publication. Senior faculty members are not familiar with the prescribed guidelines for ethical research and publication despite the ICJME, WAME and COPE guidelines being available on the internet. Most major universities and institutes in Pakistan have ERBs but no laid down publication ethics guidelines. Therefore many ethics-related issues remain unresolved at the university-level. The publishing house bears the brunt and has to intervene.

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