

Why and how do journals retract articles?

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Objective: Cases submitted to the Committee On Publication Ethics (COPE) suggest that journals and publishers do not have consistent policies about when and how to retract articles. As the first stage in developing retraction guidelines, we investigated why and how journals retract articles and editors' experiences of the process.

Design: Analysis of retractions in PubMed from 1988-2008 with English text. We obtained all retractions for 2005-2008 and a random sample from 1988-2005 from journals available at UCL. Both authors extracted data and achieved consensus on classification. A purposive sample of editors was interviewed to learn about their experiences of retractions.

Results: We analysed 312 of the 529 retractions included in PubMed from 1988-2008 and interviewed 5 editors about 7 cases. Articles were retracted because of data fabrication (5%), data falsification (4%), plagiarism (16%), redundant publication (17%), disputed authorship / data ownership (5%), inaccurate / misleading reporting (4%), honest research errors (28%), non-replicable findings (11%), or other / no stated reason (9%). Some journals also banned authors of plagiarised or redundant publications. Many retractions were issued by all or some authors (63%) but a significant proportion were issued by editors/publishers (29%) or others (8%). During interviews, editors described the considerable difficulties and significant workload in retracting articles when authors are uncooperative. Most retractions (87%) were of full papers reporting primary data but 13% were other article types (eg literature reviews or letters). The retracted publications covered basic biomedical research (58%), clinical medicine (23%) and other subjects (19%) reflecting the composition of PubMed.

Conclusions: Analysis of PubMed retractions combined with experience at COPE and published cases where journals have not retracted fraudulent articles indicates a considerable diversity of approach regarding how and why articles are retracted and sanctions imposed by journals for misconduct. Interviews suggested editors would welcome more guidance.