

MISCONDUCT IN SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATION: A RISK TO LIFE

MÁ CONDUTA EM PUBLICAÇÃO CIENTÍFICA: UM RISCO PARA A VIDA

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During a SARS-CoV-2 infection pandemic, there was also a “pandemic” of scientific articles written and published at a dreadful speed. Thus, due to their own haste, journals have made available to the medical and scientific community several studies with evident biases, which culminated in the publication “Hydroxychloroquine or Chloroquine With or Without a Macrolide for Treatment of COVID-19: A Multinational Registry Analysis” in the renowned journal *The Lancet*⁽¹⁾, with considerable controversy and need for retraction.

Meanwhile, some time ago, the magazine *Superinteressante* published an issue with the headline “How the scientific articles industry stops the advance of science” signed by journalist Bruno Vaiano⁽²⁾, demonstrating the fragility of many publications, even in journals considered to be of high impact. The writer draws attention to the business that has become the scientific publication field, where publishers gain from readers, or from researchers themselves, who have to pay to be published in “open access” platforms.

A significant concern for editors of scientific journals is the misconduct of some researchers who make up and bend numbers to achieve the desired publication. The pressure on researchers demanding more than quality, quantity, means that nowadays there is an overflow of articles in all areas. However, in medicine, it is an even more worrying matter, once that publications can endorse behaviors that endanger people’s lives.

According to one of the largest publishers in the world⁽³⁾, the actions taken by journals concerning articles in process of publication or already published may be: “article withdrawal,” used only for reports that have previous versions or may have been accidentally sent twice; “article retraction,” when there are violations of ethical codes, such as multiple submission, false claims of authorship, plagiarism, fraudulent use of data, or similar, and also to correct errors in submissions or publications; “article removal,” when the article is defamatory or violates the legal rights of others, when there is good reason to expect it to be the subject of a court order, or if the article can pose a severe health risk; and “article substitution,” in cases of possible severe health risk, the authors of the original article may remove the defective version and replace it with a corrected one.

According to Bik et al.⁽⁴⁾, around 2% of articles published in the biomedicine area have problems with scientific fraud (manufacture, forgery, and plagiarism or false peer reviews of the journal). Unfortunately, Brazil is in a prominent position in publishing misconduct. Although it is thought that productive, high-impact scientists exhibit above-average integrity and that the problem lies in low-impact journals⁽⁵⁾, the “retractionwatch” website noted that many cases of retraction occurred in high-impact, reputable

journals, to the point to be mentioned in other articles, even after public withdrawal.

Bad attitudes, such as reciprocal citation by authors, to increase the number of citations for each one, leading to citation bias, occur more often than not. Thus, a poor study with some deviation may end up being more cited than another more adequately carried out one.

The impact factor of a journal is the number of times that other reports cite articles. More publicized journals and more invested ones by millionaire publishers will have their credibility in front of the community. However, great care is advised, since not just a few cases of retraction and withdrawal of publication have occurred exactly in these journals. Another major concern is the so-called predatory publishers, which, in search of profits only, publish indistinctly.

Specifically, in Brazil, there are serious difficulties induced by the way that journals are classified by the agencies, creating a strong tendency for researchers not to publish in Brazilian journals. However, such national journals can, and usually do, publish research that adds knowledge and values to national epidemiology.

The Brazilian Journal of STD is an open journal that does not charge authors or readers. We are open to useful science publications, respecting geographic and structural issues, sometimes with limited resources common to many colleagues. However, we follow the most rigorous methods of peer review and ethical requirements. For we believe that science should not be about business, but rather a vocation.

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