Editorial

Editorial: Why Some Authors Make Bad Choices—Peer Review for Hire and Other Sad Stories

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When it is working well, peer review runs quietly in the background of scientific reporting. When the work journals do—or fail to do—hits the mainstream media, the news is seldom good.

So it was this past winter and spring, culminating in headlines like the *Washington Post*'s “Major publisher retracts 43 scientific papers amid wider fake peer-review scandal” [1]. By way of disclosure, Springer—*CORR*®'s publisher—owns the major publisher in

question here, UK-based BioMed Central.

CORR® also received a number of manuscripts that were a part of this fake-reviewer ring. The submitters of these papers clearly attempted to manipulate our peer-review process; all were detected as suspicious at the time of manuscript submission, identified as part of an organized effort to inject fraudulent reviewers into our system, and rejected.

Although *CORR*® promptly identified the fraud, many other journals did not. Journals published through BioMed Central [2] retracted several dozen articles, including nearly 20 from a single orthopaedic journal [6] as of the time of this writing. Numerous publishers in addition to Springer, including Elsevier, Sage, and Wiley—the largest names in the business—also have retracted papers tainted by this scandal [5].

The *CORR*® story, in a bit more detail: During a span of several months in 2014, authors from a half-dozen institutions in China sent manuscripts to *CORR*®, all offering suggestions for particular peer reviewers knowledgeable in the highly subspecialized topics of the manuscripts (at that time, *CORR*®

allowed authors to suggest reviewers, although for obvious reasons we seldom honored this request). Despite the author groups on these articles having no apparent connection to one another, a number of irregularities—including suggesting the names of proven reviewers but providing noninstitutional email addresses for these reviewers that differed from our records on these individuals, and the use of identical text in the reviewer requests—strongly suggested the participation of a third party.

A little sleuthing uncovered the fraudulent—and possibly criminal—appropriation of these reviewers' identities. We allowed the fraud to play out; the reviews returned were amateurish, short, and uniformly positive. Many of the reviews were sent from a single Internet Protocol (IP) address, suggesting a single site where this activity took place, even though the putative reviewers supposedly reported to us from three different continents.

The editors questioned the authors, and several identified a common manuscript-preparation service. We contacted the service, whose website (we had it translated) guaranteed

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publication to its clients in peer-reviewed journals. Its representatives responded aggressively, and threatened litigation. Shortly thereafter, the authors apologized, denied their involvement with the service, withdrew their manuscripts from our system, and some modified their contact information in our electronic database. We are unsure if the authors were coerced into these actions, or, because these communications came via email (and because it appears that the manuscript-preparation service had the authors' email login credentials), whether these notes were written without the authors' knowledge or consent.

It is likely that attempts to subvert peer review are as old as peer review itself. Competition and the pressure to publish can cause conflict between career goals and the scientific aim to discover the truth [4]. As with many systems, the ability to detect and prevent these deceptions lags behind the technologies used by those who seek to cheat. In response to the fraudulent-reviewer-ring discovery, the Committee for Publication Excellence—whose guidelines *CORR*® follows—issued a statement [3] that it is aware of the problem and that it is working with “publishers, publishing organizations and relevant national bodies” to determine how to best address the situation.

Although the authors in this incident are from China, this is not a “Chinese-authorship problem.” And although thoughtful observers have pointed to incentives related to academic promotion and pay they believe are unique to that country [8], this is not a “China-incentives problem,” either. China did not invent publish-or-perish, and the motives in play here, including career advancement, professional visibility, and money are all global human motivations. In fact, in the past several years at *CORR*®, the most egregious examples of guest authorship, ghost authorship related to commercial relationships, and frank scientific misconduct have come from the United States. Those are not “United States problems” any more than the reviewer-fraud ring is a “China problem.” Our observation is that these actions are not based in evil. Sometimes these are good people making bad choices; no doubt, sometimes it is worse than that. But all involved are influenced by dominant incentives valuing scientific output as an end in itself, and on some level they must perceive that the benefits outweigh the odds of getting caught.

We also need to identify the victims here. The authors may be among the defrauded. But even if you believe that authors who engage with a manuscript-

preparation service making too-good-to-be-true promises necessarily are complicit, there is evidence that they may have been coerced to withhold what they know about these fraudulent services. And at the very least, we should remember that the playing field is not level to begin with. Scientific reporting is difficult even for experienced scientists writing in a familiar vernacular, and English is not everyone's first language.

Although not a “China problem,” this was, unquestionably, a large incident involving Chinese institutions. And despite exposure of this problem tainting the work of hundreds or perhaps thousands of investigators, there has been a surprising silence from the host institutions. The level of investment in biomedical research in China is tremendous and growing [7], but if surgical researchers (and their universities) wish to be taken seriously as contributors on the international stage, they will need to conform to the basic norms of publication ethics [3], which includes investigating and addressing instances of obvious fraud.

As a profession—and at the level of each university or institution—we need to think about what our incentives say about us, and, where necessary, adjust them. Until that happens, journals need to remain vigilant and follow best practices [9] to avoid putting suspicious science in the

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hands of clinicians and harming patients.

And authors—particularly those whose first language is not English—should know that journals can recommend professional manuscript-preparation services whose integrity has been proven. But as this incident revealed, there are other services that appear helpful but whose services either prey on the naïve, or work in complicity with the shady. Regardless, it is the author's responsibility to choose wisely when partnering with a third party on manuscript preparation. The more an author can retain control over his or her words, and over the manuscript-submission process, the less vulnerable that author will be.

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