

The ethics of publishing

A recent incident I encountered as editor of this journal drew my attention to the risk that we face as a result of unethical practices in science. It takes an incident like this to heighten awareness about how vulnerable the 'scientific process' is to abuse. The scientific process is based on principles of trust and honesty. This starts at the data-collection phase of the experiment and includes the data analysis, writing phase (i.e. using own original text) and the avoidance of 'cherry picking' published work to support one's own data. Before the manuscript is published, it has to go through a process of peer review – although this is touted as the core of the scientific process, it may also have irregularities when a reviewer, for example, blocks studies which have a counter view to the reviewer's own paradigm.

My first exposure to 'science gone bad' was when I was a student and went to visit a friend working at the University of Vermont College of Medicine, USA. She introduced me to a prominent scientist at the time, Eric Poelhman, who was well published in the area of obesity, physical activity, ageing and menopause. As a relatively young scientist, Poelhman had nearly 200 publications. I followed his career with interest and was staggered when I found out that he had been charged with conducting fraudulent work.^[1] The charges included falsifying data in a well-cited paper published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 1995. This study showed that hormone-replacement therapy could prevent the decline in energy expenditure and increases in body fat during menopause. The study included data on 35 women, many of whom did not exist.^[1]

After a long investigation, Poelhman pleaded guilty to fabricating data in 10 of his papers that were submitted between 1992 and 2000. He also pleaded guilty to falsifying 17 grant applications to the National Institutes of Health.^[2] His punishment: 1 year in jail and he was barred from getting more federal research grants. He was also ordered by the court to write letters of retraction and correction to several scientific journals.^[2] How many more cases are there like this, but where the scientists have not been caught? How much money has been wasted on sponsoring fraudulent research? How much harm has fraudulent research caused? I'm sure if we knew the answers to these questions we would be alarmed.

In an attempt to promote principles of best practice for publishing scientific papers, the *International Journal of Cardiology* published the following set of guidelines. These provide an excellent summary and are worth repeating and applying to papers submitted to the *South African Journal of Sports Medicine*.^[3]

1. That the corresponding author has the approval of all other listed authors for the submission and publication of all versions of the manuscript.
2. That all people who have a right to be recognised as authors have been included on the list of authors and everyone listed as an

author has made an independent material contribution to the manuscript.

3. That the work submitted in the manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere and is not presently under consideration of publication by any other journal. The oral or poster presentation of parts of the work and its publishing as a single page abstract does not count as prior publication for this purpose.
4. That the material in the manuscript has been acquired according to modern ethical standards and does not contain material copied from anyone else without their written permission.
5. That all material which derives from prior work, including from the same authors, is properly attributed to the prior publication by proper citation.
6. That the manuscript will be maintained on the servers of the Journal and held to be a valid publication by the Journal only as long as all statements in these principles remain true.
7. That if any of the statements above ceases to be true the authors have a duty to notify the journal as soon as possible so that the manuscript can be withdrawn.'

To finish up, as the year draws to a close I would like to thank everyone that I have asked to review papers. This is a time-consuming task for which there is no apparent recognition. The growth of the journal can be attributed to their thoroughness and dedication. The acceptance rate of papers submitted to the *South African Journal of Sports Medicine* for review hovers around 60%, and there is a waiting list of accepted papers. These are all positive signs that bode well for the future!

Mike Lambert
Editor-in-chief



References

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