**Title: Ethics of publication process: How do indexed Indian biomedical journals measure up?**

**Comments of Reviewer 1**:

The authors have done a good survey. However, in its present form the data does not provide much information. The message needs to be made known, but major revisions are required before the paper can be accepted.

Specific comments:

1. Title: “Ethics of the publication process” is broad term that includes ethical principles that guide the publisher, the editor, reviewers and authors. This is very clearly described in the Elsevier website: <https://www.elsevier.com/about/policies/publishing-ethics>

The scope of the present paper is only to do a descriptive evaluation or survey of the “guide to authors” given in the website. This, therefore, covers only one small aspect of “ethics in the publication process”. The title has to be modified to indicate this specifically. I suggest something like: “Survey of completeness of ethics-related guidelines for authors in websites of indexed medical journals published in India”

2. Abstract: The first line of the abstract “…instructions to author on these websites need to be…”. What website are the authors referring to in the very first line of the abstract. I feel a structured abstract with background, methods, results and conclusions is an appropriate format for the abstract for this paper.

PubMed is only a search tool. MEDLINE and PubMed Central are the databases that PubMed searches. This has to be made clear.

What is meant by “actively looking for plagiarism”? Do the authors refer to the use a plagiarism-checking software?

Change “Data sharing was not mentioned ….” to “Guidelines regarding data sharing were not mentioned ….”.

Finally, what do the authors conclude? How do the authors interpret the data they got? Overall, were the journal websites good, average or bad when it came to stating their ethical guidelines for authors?

3. Introduction:

The authors say, “This type of assessment has been done in the past for a limited number of journals, or specialties”. It is important to briefly state what the results were from the studies done on the “limited number of journals, or specialties” in order to justify this study and establish the need for it.

What do the authors mean when they say “It has not been done across specialties and across major indexing databases.” More specifics regarding the specialties and databases already studied and published has to be provided.

PubMed is not an indexing data base. PubMed is a search tool for the MEDLINE and PubMed Central databases.

The inclusion of the number of retractions and reasons for retraction in this paper seems incongruent with the rest of the paper. Why do the authors think that an evaluation of “instructions to authors” should be linked to the number of retractions? Are they suggesting that retractions may be because the guidelines to authors are not adequate? On the other hand, do the “instructions to authors” provide details on the circumstances that would necessitate retraction of a paper published in the journal?

4. Methodology:

What is the definition of an “Indian journal”? Is it one that is published in India or one that is managed by a professional body in India? It is not clear.

A list of 3 publications are provided as references for the 14-point check-list that was used. It is not clear whether the check-list was obtained from these publications or modified from these publications or developed by the authors based on “review of literature”. More information is required on how this 14-point check-list was developed.

Is Figure 1 the check-list that was used? If so, it has to be clearly stated.

How many of the journals included are listed in Beall’s list of predatory journals. The journals on this list should be excluded from this study.

5. Results

The results, as presented, gives an idea about journal performance in specific areas. This type of descriptive analysis is good. However, they do not give a good idea of what is happening when you consider the adequacy of information provided as a whole in a particular journal. For example, how many journals were 100% satisfactory in all the 14 points assessed? How many journals had information that is considered 75 – 99% complete, how many 50 – 75% and so on and so forth. This type of analysis will give us a wholistic picture.

It would be interesting to see how much of the “instructions to authors” on these websites are plagiarized from other journal websites.

The results presented on retraction rates and reasons seems irrelevant to this paper.

6. Discussion

Again, PubMed is wrongly mentioned as an indexing database which it is not.

The authors say, “A study was conducted to assess reporting practice of ethics approval in four Indian journals, namely Journal of Association of Physicians of India (JAPI), Indian Journal of Surgery (IJS), Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology of India (JOGI) and Indian Journal of Orthopaedics (IJO). A total of 673 articles were reviewed of which mere 163 (24%) reported ethics approval (6).” In this study, did the “instructions to authors” specifically state that obtaining IRB approval (or animal ethics approval) prior to initiating the study, is an essential pre-requisite for publication?

I find that the discussion on importance of various aspects of the checklist is not needed. It is universally accepted that following ethical guidelines is important and the readers may be referred to many excellent reviews already available that discuss these issues in great detail. The Discussion section of this paper should be dedicated to discussing the results of this paper, rather than indulge in general thoughts about the importance of ethics.

The last 2 paragraphs in the sub-section “strengths and limitations” discussing publication fraud is again not relevant to this paper and should be removed.

**Comments of Reviewer 2:**

The issues dealt with in the paper are certainly relevant to the fields of bioethics and medical ethics in the developing countries. I must congratulate the authors for this extensive work. I have a few minor comments for consideration. The topic is rather too specialized but it addresses relevant issues regarding Indian publication standards. My observations are below:

* 19 journals did not have authors instructions accessible. Any reason why? Last issue published by these journals? Links not working? Journals inactive? If appropriate discuss this in the discussion.
* It is not mandatory for a journal to be listed in ICMJE's list to allow them to follow ICMJE recommendations. If they are following without listing them on ICMJE’s list it is good sign.
* Did you check which version of ICMJE they were referring to. To reviewer’s knowledge most of the Indian journal refer to very old version .... 2006 or 2008 etc. As you have collected data from 2012 to 2017, it seems you collected data in Nov, Dec 2017 or in the first quarter of 2018. The latest version you could have looked for is Dec 2016.
* You only looked for registration in CTRI as a requirement, but ICMJE recommends registration in any “public trials registry at or before the time of first patient enrollment”. Did you check, how many of the 36 journals, that recommend registration, require prospective registration (i.e. registration at or before the time of first patient enrollment)?
* Also, you only looked for CONSORT which is recommended for only randomized trials. There are several other checklists for different types of studies. Listing of these in author instructions would be expected. However, it may also depend on the type of studies a journal publishes.
* 18 journals mentioned that they were members of COPE, did you check out of total 110 included journals, how many were listed on COPE website, similar to what you did for ICMJE?
* Consider adding in the discussion, that the ICMJE's name (URM) was renamed in August 2013 which is a major latest revision of ICMJE. This also changed the authorship criterion from 3 to 4.
* ICMJE has started the initiative of data sharing from June 2017 and it has mandated data sharing from 1 July 2018. However, there are practical challenges in implementing this practice, hence journals have not started mandating or recommending it.
* In methods please clarify how the retracted articles were obtained. It is not clear. You have only mentioned that using few key words you did it. How many hits you got? Where did you search, only PubMed?

You can go through Retraction Watch. It has significant information on retractions.

* Strengths and limitations: Reviewer believe that third para in this section is not relevant to this section. It is summary of unethical practices documented by few researchers. There was another study presented in peer review congress (2017) (<https://peerreviewcongress.org/prc17-0154>) which highlighted unethical practices of authorship.

Consider adding a limitation that only PubMed and IndMed listed journals were evaluated. There are many legitimate journals which are not listed in PubMed etc (may have significant share of publication in India). Will these have any impact on the overall result.

Consider crosschecking Table 3 for accuracy. Row with Indian journal of plastic surgery and the row below it seems mixed.

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