“Retraction of papers authored by Yuhji Saitoh- beyond the Fujii phenomenon``

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Abstract:

Different aspects of retracted papers authored by Yoshitaka Fujii, Joachim Boldt and Scott Reuben has been investigated. Yuhji Saitoh has co-authored many papers with Yoshitaka Fujii, and many of their publications have been retracted. Investigation revealed unethical research practices in many papers authored by Yuhji Saitoh in which Yoshitaka Fujii was not a co-author. Unfortunately, 50% of those papers are yet to be retracted. Among those retracted, only 13.3% retraction notices were in line with the guidelines produced by the Committee on Publication Ethics. We also contacted the Editors of the journals that are yet to retract articles identified as eligible for retraction. We identified that there is a vast scope to improve the way research that violates ethical standards of scientific scholarly publication are handled.

Introduction:

The misdemeanor by Yoshitaka Fujii , Joachim Boldt and Scott Reuben has been discussed in length, and justly so [1-4]. Multi-institutional investigations led to retraction of hundreds of papers by them. Yuhji Saitoh has collaborated with Yoshitaka Fujii in many published articles [5]. Statistical analysis suggests an improbable distribution of baseline data as well as homogeneity of results in 32 randomized trials authored by Yuhji Saitoh [5]. An investigation by Japanese Society of Anesthesiology (JSA) in to the accusation of fraud in articles by Yuhji Saitoh recommended for retraction of ten papers [6]. They also expressed that likely data manipulation or fabrication took place in most of the fortyish articles investigated by the society [6]. Yoshitaka Fujii was not co-authors in any of the article for which retraction was suggested [6].

Different aspects of retracted articles authored by Yoshitaka Fujii, Joachim Boldt and Scott Reuben and their retraction notices has been analyzed recently [7]. We believe that along with Fujii, Boldt and Reuben, the retractions by Yuhji Saitoh warrants analysis. Therefore, we set out to scrutinize the retracted article authored by Yuhji Saitoh in which Yoshitaka Fujii was not a coauthor and their retraction notices. We matched the retraction notices against the criteria set out in the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines on retraction notices and retracted articles [8]. Time duration taken for these papers to be retracted was examined. We also examined whether the articles mentioned in the report of JSA and Carlisle et al (Online Appendix S2: references, part one) has been retracted [5, 6].

Methods:

This manuscript adheres to the applicable STROBE guidelines.

In PubMed, the retraction notice and the retracted article is assigned the Publication Type ``Retraction of Publication`` and ``Retracted Publication`` respectively [9]. The retracted article is accompanied by a note that mentions it as a `` RETRACTED ARTICLE ``. Citation for the retraction notice and a link to it is added to the retracted article. Similarly citation and a link to the retracted article it is added to the retraction notice [10].

PubMed was searched to retrieve ``Retracted Publications`` authored by Saitoh Y that does not include Fujii Y as a coauthor\*. Similarly data about the Publication Type ``Retraction of Publication`` was retrieved\*\*. ``Author`` field of the Retraction Watch Database was inquired with the last name Saitoh. From the suggestions listed by the database, we chose the author name Saitoh, Yuhji. Among the results displayed, papers authored by Yuhji Saitoh in which Yoshitaka Fujii was not a coauthor was chosen.

We visited the webpages of the journals retrieved from previous two searches and obtained the retraction notice and the retracted articles. The webpages were searched with the keywords ``Retraction OR retracted OR Erratum OR withdrawn OR corrigendum OR errata`` for any further data. The webpage of COPE was searched to find out if the journals containing retracted or article eligible for retraction was a member of COPE [11]. An article was regarded as eligible for retraction if it was mentioned in the appendix of investigation report of JSA [6]. If they were not member, we planned to search the webpage of the relevant journal to find out if COPE is referred to in their journal related information sheet. Retraction notices were evaluated against the criteria for retraction notices endorsed by COPE (Table 1).

Table 1: Committee on Publication Ethics guideline for retraction notices and retracted articles [7, 8]

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Retraction Notice | Whether freely available to all readers |
| Whether the notice is clearly identified as a retraction |
| Whether clearly identify the retracted article  ( We considered it to be clearly identifying the retracted article if the heading contained either title of the article or details of journal name with issue, volume and page information OR name of author with any one of the previous two) |
| Mention the reason(s) behind the decision to retract |
| Mention who is retracting the article |
| Whether it is linked to the retracted article in case of electronic version |
| Retracted Article | Whether it is still available in the electronic archive |
| Whether it is identified as retracted on the webpage of the journal and bibliographic databases |

We also evaluated if the PDF versions of the retracted papers are watermarked [7].

Though report about possible research misconduct in certain papers authored by Yuhji Saitoh was published in 18th December 2016, we defined the date of eligibility for retraction as 25th September 2017 (date in which the investigation report by JSA was published) [5, 12]. Time duration taken for retraction was defined as the duration between date of eligibility for retraction and date of electronic publication (ahead of print) of its retraction notice. If it was not available, the first day of the month of its print publication was considered. We defined `life time of the retracted articles` as the time duration between the date of publication and retraction. For calculation of the time durations, only the number of months was considered (For e.g. if the duration was 162 months and 26 days, it was considered as 162 months)

We also observed whether the articles that were found to have violated ethics by investigation by JSA are retracted [6]. The list of articles examined by Carlisle et al. was retrieved and we investigated if any of those were retracted [5]. We emailed the Editor of the journals that were yet to retract articles mentioned in the report by JSA.

All the electronic searches and email contact were carried out on 5/1/2019 and relevant documents downloaded by the first author. Again on 6/1/2019, the search was repeated by the first author. The second author carried out the search on 7/1/2019 independently.

Results:

The search strategy employed with results is mentioned in Figure 1. Among the citations retrieved from Retraction watch database, 14 papers met inclusion criteria. All the citations retrieved from PubMed (13 numbers) was included in Retraction Watch Database. We gathered another retracted article from individual journal Webpage search. Both these additional papers are available in PubMed, but none has been flagged as retracted.

Figure 1: Flow diagram of selection of retracted articles and retraction notices

Eight journals published all the retracted or articles eligible for retraction. Seven were members of COPE. In the webpage of the remaining journal no reference to COPE could be found. Only 2 (13%) retraction notices complied with all the parameters mentioned in Table 1 (Appendix 1). Details analysis of the retracted articles and retraction notices is available in Table 2 (Appendix 1). Watermark demonstrating the retracted status of the paper were not present on 4 (26.6%) papers (Appendix 1).

Table 2: Conformity of retracted articles and retraction notices with parameters evaluated [7, 8] (Appendix 1)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Parameters evaluated | Absolute number  (Proportion) | Remarks |
| Retraction Notice | Freely available to all readers | 15 (100%) |  |
| Notice is clearly identified as a retraction | 15 (100%) |  |
| Clearly identify the retracted article | 11 (73.3%) | Eight notices included author name, title and other citation details  Three notices mentioned only the title.  Three notice headline do not mention any information on which article is being retracted.  One notice was published on the page displaying the retracted article and did not have any heading. |
| Mentions the reason(s) behind the decision to retract | 14 (93.3%) |  |
| Mention who is retracting the article | 15 (100%) |  |
| It is linked to the retracted article in case of electronic version | 4 (26.6%) | One notice was published with the retracted article |
| Retracted Article | Available in the electronic archive | 15 (100%) |  |
| Identified as retracted on the webpage of the journal and bibliographic databases | 12 (80%) |  |
| Identified as retracted on bibliographic databases | 13 (86.6%) |  |
| PDF version is watermarked | 11 (73.3%) | The PDF version of these two articles were also not water marked, and they were published by one journal. Among the 13 articles identified as retracted, the PDF of version of 2 (15.3%) articles were not watermarked. Though not watermarked, the retraction notice was made available along with the article in the PDF version of another article |

All the retracted articles were available in the journal webpage, but 2 (13.3%) of them were not identified as retracted (Appendix 2). The PDF version of these two articles were also not water marked, and they were published by one journal. Among the 13 articles identified as retracted, the PDF of version of 2 (15.3%) articles were not watermarked. Though not watermarked, the retraction notice was made available along with the article in the PDF version of another article. Two retracted articles were not flagged as retracted in PubMed (Appendix 2). Although JSA recommended for retraction, 5 (50%) articles were not retracted till the day of our search [6]. Among the 32papers analyzed by Carlisle *et al,* one was not published [5]. Among those 31 published papers, 22 met our inclusion criteria and 10 among those has been retracted (Appendix 2).

Two articles were retracted prior to publication of the report by JSA and in one the date of retraction could not be determined (Appendix 1). The median [Interquartile range (IQR)] of time required for retraction from the date of declaration of being eligible for retraction is 14 (3) months. Kaplan–Meier survival curves with 95%CI for the time from eligibility to actual retraction is presented in **Figure 2.** Figure 2: Kaplan-Meier survival curve for retraction of papers by Yuhji Saitoh Y without Yoshitaka Fujii as a co-author.

The median (IQR) of the lifetime of the retracted article is 234 (128) months.

Two journals contained articles deemed eligible for retraction by JSA [6]. One journal is yet to respond to our email. The Editor-in-Chief of the other journal informed that ``the mail from JSA recommending the retraction of the article had not been forwarded to the editor-in-chief until the end of the last year due to administrative error`` and they have ``just started appropriate procedures``.

Discussion:

We observed that, although eligible for retraction, half of the papers are yet to be retracted and only 13.3% retraction notices complied with the recommendations of COPE.

It is the responsibility of the scientific community to uphold the benchmark of ethics in science. Retraction is the only way to purge fraudulent researches and a uniform retraction policy ensures its accuracy and relevance. But retraction policies of journal are not uniform [13, 14]. Absence of external or internal guidance may be some of the reasons for disparities in retraction policies [13]. The first guideline by COPE for retraction was published in 2009 [13]. Though many journals lack defined retraction policy, it’s heartening to find that the number of journals with defined retraction policy is on the rise [14]. COPE, describing the code of conduct for journal editor, mentions that they should ``always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions and apologies when needed`` [15]. The COPE expects its members to follow it. But, there may be many reasons why an editor may be reluctant to retract [16]. There are many intricacies and obstructions to initiate investigations of suspected research misconduct and its subsequent retraction [17, 18]. In our study, the prompt response by one journal is assuring, and it revealed that possible administrative issues in the editorial office may also hinder retraction. The keenness of a substantial number of journal editors and publishers to respond and act accordingly to queries about non-retraction of fraudulent research is encouraging [7]. We sincerely wished to receive some feedback from the journal editor of the other journal so to have some more insight into the reason(s) for non-retraction of fraudulent research. JSA has urged ``respective journals to make retractions or take any other actions they deem necessary `` [6]. These non-retraction reinforces the fact that that there is yet no mechanism that ensures retraction of article that warrants it [10]. In fact many journal editors may be ``unaware of the need for retraction`` of research deemed eligible for retraction [7]. The retraction of hundreds papers tainted with scientific misconduct is welcome, but relevant organizations should construct mechanisms that mends the gap between report of investigative agency and the concerned journals and other stakeholders.

Standardized retraction notices ensures complete and transparent information about retracted article. Across different specialties, sizable numbers of retraction notices do not comply with the guidelines of COPE [7, 19, 20]. Except one, all the journals evaluated in our study is a member of COPE. It’s disconcerting, even being a member, majority of retraction notices failed to comply the guidelines of COPE. The better a database is in tracking retraction notices, the more easily retracted article can be identified [20]. We observed that search strategy using the name of author and the Publication Type Retraction of Publication failed to retrieve many relevant data. COPE *suggests* the use of name of author and title of the article in the heading of the retraction notice [8]. We believe that an unambiguous recommendation by COPE to use both will make retraction notices more visible in PubMed. Two of the retracted papers were not flagged by PubMed. Late indexation of retraction notices are known and it should be kept in mind while using PubMed [21].

A retracted paper is no longer a part of human knowledge. But, in many instances such articles get citations, many being positive citations [20, 22]. Such instances have tremendous ramifications [23]. Identification of retracted material is of unconditional importance. It’s alarming that 20% articles were not identified as retracted in journal webpage or in PubMed. The widespread use of electronic devices increases the chance of unsuspecting authors to cite retracted article if it is not flagged in the journal webpage, electronic databases or lack of watermark in the PDF version [7].

The time from eligibility to actual retraction is lower than those for Fujii, Boldt and Reuben [7]. But, it must be noted that many articles are still not retracted. The long duration taken for retraction from publication is notable. Science purges the fraudulent papers, but takes time. This time lag pollutes the literature and negates the very essence of science. This needs to be changed. Though the method proposed by Carlisle has generated debate, its application during review process is one a courageous step [24, 25].

We would like to mention a few limitations of our study. The methodology used by Retraction Watch Database to collect information on retracted publication is not in public domain. Moreover, only a subset of journals are abstracted in PubMed and we searched the webpages of only those journals that have published either retracted publications or randomized trials with probable ethics violation. There must have been journals that published other types of paper by Yuhji Saitoh.

Conclusion: Not all the papers authored by Yuhji Saitoh without Yoshitaka Fujii as a co-author has been retracted. Among those retracted, many do not conform to the guideline set by COPE. There is a vast scope to improve the process of handling research that breach ethics of scientific scholarly publications.

Acknowledgments: None

Competing interests: None

Appendices:

Appendix 1: A spreadsheet of retracted articles by Yuhji Saitoh, details of notices of retraction, their conformance with parameters in Table 1 and the presence of a watermark.

Appendix 2: A document mentioning retracted articles by Yuhji Saitoh retracted but not identified as retracted in journal webpage and PubMed, eligible for retraction but not retracted and mentioned in the list by Carlisle et al but not retracted.

Foot notes:

\* Search Strategy ((Retracted Publication[Publication Type]) AND Saitoh Y[Author]) NOT Fujii Y[Author]

\*\* Search Strategy Search strategy (Retraction of Publication[Publication Type]) AND Saitoh Y[Author]

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