**‘Publish or perish’ versus publication ethics: the dilemma during COVID-19 pandemic**

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**Running head**: Publication ethics during COVID pandemic

**Conflict of interest:** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest

**Funding:** No funding was received for this submission

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**Abstract**

In pandemic situations, we require real-time, accurate information to guide effective and timely responses. This requires rapid and timely publication of information which poses threat to the integrity of the information published. Therefore, the balance between the potential risks and benefits of rapid publication can be achieved by adhering to the principles of publication ethics. Here, we highlight ten potential issues related to scientific publication and dissemination of information during this pandemic and the underlying principles of publication ethics that could guide us. We have discussed the role of rigorous peer review, greater transparency in reporting of findings, role of editors and researchers in promoting publication ethics. We have also highlighted the detrimental effect of political interference and lobby of the pharma sector on publication ethics. We believe that the scientific rigor of papers should not be compromised during the pandemic because the implications of such information in terms of its impact on public health decision making is huge.

Public health emergencies require real-time, accurate information to guide effective and timely responses. This requires rapid and timely publication of information to advance both the scientific validity and the social value of research. But on the other hand, it poses threat to the integrity of the information published. Inaccurate information foster false public perceptions which persist even when they are corrected. Inaccurate or incomplete information arises due to the difficulty in conducting rigorous studies during an emergency, and the race for fame and prestige that comes with being first. Therefore, the balance between the potential risks and benefits of rapid publication can be achieved by adhering to the principles of publication ethics— that promote integrity, accuracy and value of scientific literature.[1] Here, we highlight ten potential issues related to international scientific publishing and dissemination of information during this pandemic and the underlying principles of publication ethics that could guide us.

   -





          



        

    







   -





          



        

    







   -





          



        

    







First, there is a race among journals to quickly publish COVID-19 related papers, thereby draw more citations and improve their impact factor. Journals have adopted a fast-track review for COVID-19 papers where reviewers have volunteered to review COVID-19 papers faster than non-COVID submissions. They have also come up with special COVID-19 issues. The fast-track process seems to have circumvented the traditional, more time consuming peer-review. This is a cause for concern and has led to a slew of retractions, even from some of the most prestigious journals such as the Lancet and the New England Journal of Medicine, bringing bad reputation to these famed journals. Typically, the only way to ensure scientific validity is through rigorous peer review. There should be no shortcuts here. Quality reviews take some time, but preserving ethics in publication is non-negotiable.

Second, many unscrutinized COVID-19 related papers have been published online on preprint servers such as medRxiv, bioRxiv. These preprint repositories make information online quickly and easily accessible. But we must exercise caution while citing these papers and drawing conclusions out of them. However, we have witnessed lot of papers related to COVID-19 citing preprint materials. Rather than completely discouraging citing these preprints, it must be explicitly stated that these are non-peer reviewed and should be carefully interpreted.

Third, transparency is even more important in the context of public health emergencies. This is required in terms of disclosure of sources of funding, other potential sources of conflict of interest, explicitly stating the limitations of the data and the study, process of peer review and review reports. The editor and his/her team is entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out a thorough check before anything goes out in public domain.

Fourth, there is lot of talk around data availability in the public domain. The two recent retractions from the Lancet and NEJM also had doubts regarding the veracity of the data. We strongly recommend that clinical data including test results should be made available in public domain (unlinked anonymous) for the research community (clinical, laboratory, public health and social sciences) to access, analyze and provide useful insights and real-time context-specific solutions to understand and tackle the pandemic. Editors must ensure that researchers make a firm commitment to make the data publicly available as a pre-requisite for publishing the article.

Fifth, political interference in science will have a detrimental effect on publication ethics.

   



Some journals retracted papers on COVID-19 without convincing reasons. These papers were published in Chinese journals and questioned crucial issues with important ramifications. Did government pressure trigger retractions of these provocative papers? A paper from Nature indicates that there is indeed Chinese attempt to control COVID-19 related information.[2]

Sixth, with a lot of stake involved in drug treatment of COVID-19, editors and reviewers have to be very careful about the recommendations that these papers make. Premature publication of definitive recommendations based on inconclusive ground serve only at best to confuse and mislead. A recent study on the role of Hydroxychloroquine and Azithromycin in the treatment of COVID-19 recommended that COVID-19 patients be treated with this combination. However, with lots of methodological biases, the study went too far in recommending the treatment. The study received lot of undue attention all the way to the White House, which raises concern.

Seventh, as researchers we have important roles to play here to promote ethics in publishing and disseminating information. The role of editors becomes difficult when researchers themselves have so much to hide and resort to fraudulent practices. We should communicate work on social and other media responsibly, with professionalism and transparency. We, as readers and reviewers should also be vigilant in identifying deceitful practices and flawed interpretations by overzealous, negligent or unethical researchers.

Eighth, are editors under pressure to make rapid decisions about the COVID-19 papers they are receiving? In this race of becoming the first to publish, probably they are. But, they should stay true to their editorial policies, maintain high standards of peer review and transparency while being aware of their public health responsibilities. Any amendment to the usual procedures should be declared in the manuscripts as an editorial note and also be disclosed transparently on the journal’s website.

Ninth, as we look for new treatments, the pharma sector lobby is a strong influence and can impact decision making by their undue interference in research and policy making. This requires a vigilant watch not only by the editors and team, but also by the media and the entire researcher fraternity.

Tenth, it is very important for the journals not to be biased by the findings of the study, rather focus on the methodology of the study and the veracity of the findings. The journals should refrain themselves from being politicised or polarised and strive towards scientific rigor.

To conclude, although it is very important for the academic fraternity to continue publishing in high impact journals, we believe that the scientific rigor of such papers should not be compromised during the pandemic because the implications of such information in terms of its impact on public health decision making is huge. In due course of time, we are going to witness a similar race for publishing the results of vaccine trials and the undue influence of vaccine manufacturers and other stakeholders. We need to put publication ethics at the forefront for the greater good of the community. If we buckle down, science loses.

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