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A letter of concern

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Editor-in-Chief, *Early Human Development*

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Dear Dr. Maalouf,

I am writing to express concern about a large number of unprofessional articles that have been recently published in *Early Human Development*.

On 5 December, I contacted you with a brief message via *EHD*'s homepage. In that message, I raised the issue that two authors, Victor Grech and Mariella Scerri, have five articles in press and three articles recently published at *EHD*, all of which are notably of poor quality. I now realise that the facts at hand are more surprising and concerning than I first thought.

The facts I now raise are as follows:¹

- Of the 636 articles *EHD* has published since 2018, Dr. Victor Grech (affiliated with the University of Malta and its associated hospital) has been an author on 113. He is listed as the sole author of 57.
 - 19 of these 113 articles focus on various aspects of the TV series Star Trek. They generally discuss topics within the series that are relevant to the field of medicine, but the extent of this stops at discussing the portrayals of doctors,² medical practices,³ medical technology,⁴ etc., in the series.

Many of these articles were confusingly published in the category of ‘Best practice guidelines’.

- 24 of the 113 articles focus on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these articles are on fairly benign topics, e.g. sports professionals as role models during the pandemic⁵ and Malta’s tourism industry during the pandemic.⁶ Some are essentially restatements of common public health guidance, e.g. an article urging uptake of this year’s seasonal influenza vaccine⁷ and one stating the need to combat fake news and not to needlessly politicise the pandemic.⁸
 - Others discuss more contentious aspects of the pandemic and do so more concerningly. One article performs an extremely crude calculation that the pandemic could cause nearly 440 million deaths globally.⁹ This particular article is listed as having been received and accepted on the same day (23 March 2020), suggesting that it was not peer reviewed. It has since been cited 23 times. Instead of issuing a correction or retraction in the face of the article’s absurd claim, *EHD* published an ‘update’ by the author one month later that lowered his estimate to 44 million deaths – on the basis of 90% of cases allegedly being asymptomatic. This is not true and never reasonably been thought to be true. This ‘update’ also seems not to have been peer reviewed. Other articles in this more concerning vein include an unoriginal but similarly crude comparison of the costs of hypothetical coronavirus vaccine side effects versus the costs of COVID-19 mortality.¹⁰
 - 48 of the 113 articles are from a series of ‘Best practice guidelines’ that *EHD* published in 2018 and 2019, entitled ‘Writing A Scientific Paper’ or ‘WASP’. These articles are very short, usually poor-quality pieces that give general advice on specific aspects of the scientific process. They include one on how to enter data into Excel,¹¹ one on Star Trek that is inexplicably included in this ‘WASP’ series,¹² and one that is largely a collection of inspirational quotes for research scientists.¹³ In sum, they read like a blog or the notes of a university course.
 - These articles cite themselves extensively. The first in the series¹⁴ has been cited 66 times, mostly by other articles in the series, and it is the 4th most cited article in your journal of those published since 2015.
- The 90 articles that I describe above do not fall within the stated aims and scope of *EHD*: ‘Established as an authoritative, highly cited voice on early human development, Early Human Development provides a unique opportunity for researchers and clinicians to bridge the communication gap between disciplines. Creating a forum for the productive exchange of ideas concerning early human growth and development, the journal publishes original research and clinical papers with particular emphasis on the continuum between fetal life and the

perinatal period; aspects of postnatal growth influenced by early events; and the safeguarding of the quality of human survival'.¹⁵

- The publication of these articles also does not reasonably meet Elsevier's ethical standards for publication decisions: 'The editor of a learned journal is solely and independently responsible for deciding which of the articles submitted to the journal should be published... The validation of the work in question and its importance to researchers and readers must always underwrite such decisions'.¹⁶
- Of the 401 articles that have cited Grech since 2018, 118 were published in *EHD*. Of those 118 articles, Grech was a co-author on 84 of them. Of the remaining 34 articles that do not include Grech as a co-author, 26 had at least one author affiliated with the University of Malta or its associated hospital.

In total, these facts are very concerning. The details of this case that are available to me as an outside researcher are not entirely clear. At worse, they suggest practices by which authors, namely Victor Grech, have tried to inflate their publication and citation metrics through the submission of poor-quality, self-citing work. I do not speak of Dr. Grech with any particular animus – I do not know him, and there seem to be other authors at his institution involved in these potential practices. However, the facts seem to suggest that he is a key figure in this case.

The facts also suggest the significant and inexplicable complicity of *EHD* in that aim. Most of the articles I refer to do not list their respective submission and acceptance dates, but their poor quality suggests that they were not peer reviewed. Assuming that *only* the 90 articles that I refer were not peer reviewed implies that 14% of the output of *EID* since 2018 was not peer reviewed.

I urge you to look into these matters. Of the 90 articles I highlight, 22 are currently listed as in press. I urge you to prevent the full publication of these articles, at least temporarily.

In the interest of public transparency, I have made this letter available online at <https://github.com/hggaddy/public/tree/master/EHD>. I have copied the three Associate Editors of *EHD*, the Director of Publishing Services at Elsevier, and members of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Malta.

In concern,
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Notes

¹All article and citation counts come from Scopus searches conducted on 8 December 2020.

- ²e.g. Grech, V. (2020). Doctors in Star Trek: Dr. Leonard McCoy in Star Trek: The Next Generation. *EHD*, 144, 104989. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2020.104989
- ³e.g. Grech, V. (2020). The banality of evil in the occupation of Star Trek's Bajor. *EHD*, 145, 105016. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2020.105016
- ⁴e.g. Grech, V. (2020). Medical nanotechnology in Star Trek: A force for both good and evil. *EHD*, 145, 105019. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2020.105019
- ⁵Scerri, M., & Grech, V. (2020). Sports and sportsmen as role models – or otherwise – in the COVID-19 era. *EHD*, 105254. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2020.105254
- ⁶Grech, V., Cuschieri, S., Balzan, M., Grech, P., Fabri, S., & Gauci, C. (2020). Malta tourism losses due to second wave of COVID-19. *EHD*, 105208. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2020.105208
- ⁷Grech, V., & Borg, M. (2020). Influenza vaccination in the COVID-19 era. *EHD*, 148, 105116. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2020.105116
- ⁸Scerri, M., & Grech, V. (2020) COVID-19, its novel vaccination and fake news – What a brew. *EHD*, 105256. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2020.105256
- ⁹Grech, V. (2020). Unknown unknowns – COVID-19 and potential global mortality. *EHD*, 144, 105026. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2020.105026
- ¹⁰Grech, V., & Calleja, N. (2020). Theoretical novel COVID-19 vaccination risk of rare and severe adverse events versus COVID-19 mortality. *EHD*, 105212. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2020.105212
- ¹¹Grech, V. (2018). WASP (Write a Scientific Paper) using Excel — 1: Data entry and validation. *EHD*, 117, 98–103. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2018.01.002
- ¹²Grech, V., Grech, E. V., & Eberl, J. T. (2018). WASP: (Write a Scientific Paper). Doctors in Star Trek – Correctly compassionate, caring Kantian Zampolit. *EHD*, 124, 68–72. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2018.04.029
- ¹³Grech, V. (2018). WASP (Write a Scientific Paper): To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield. *EHD*, 127, 96–97. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2018.07.010
- ¹⁴Grech, V., & Cuschieri, S. (2018). Write a scientific paper (WASP) - a career-critical skill. *EHD*, 117, 96–97. doi:10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2018.01.001
- ¹⁵<https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/early-human-development/about/aims-and-scope>
- ¹⁶<https://www.elsevier.com/about/policies/publishing-ethics>