

JENN GANTON



## Illegitimate journals scam even senior scientists

Kelly Cobey has seen a litany of researchers preyed on by predatory journals — and has ideas on how to stop it.

The e-mail's subject line read, "Trouble with a duplicate publication." As soon as it landed in my inbox, I knew it was important: the sender, an accomplished senior scientist, had flagged it as urgent. His message described a troubling encounter with a predatory journal.

Earlier that year, he had received an e-mail invitation to submit an article to a journal with a title and remit matching his expertise. The journal described itself as new and in search of content for a forthcoming issue. Shortly before this, the scientist's research fellow had pulled together an oral presentation on that very topic, and so it seemed like a good opportunity for him to convert the work into a published article.

They drafted a manuscript and submitted it. Soon, along with receiving some modest feedback, they were informed that the article had been accepted. After resubmitting the paper with minor revisions, they were sent a bill — US\$979 — to cover the costs of publishing. Alarm bells went off. The invitation had not indicated any fee. The authors were wary of the journal's integrity, and had no funding to pay the article-processing charge. They rescinded their submission and ignored a spate of follow-up invoices. They next submitted their work to a familiar, legitimate journal. It was accepted after peer review and revision, and the authors thought that their brush with a predatory journal had ended.

Months later, the fellow discovered the article 'published' on the predatory journal's website. Their question to me: what should they do now?

Unfortunately, I have received a number of similar e-mails. As publications officer at the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute in Canada, I spend a great deal of my time consulting about research and publication best practices. Problems with submissions to predatory journals are not unique to our institution. (In this issue of *Nature*, my colleagues and I report that even authors from prestigious institutions publish in them.) However, few research institutions have hired a staff member with a role such as mine, dedicated to educating researchers and guiding them in their journal submission.

I advised the senior scientist to write a letter to the editor whom he had corresponded with earlier to request immediate removal of his article, and to remind him that he had revoked his submission without paying the publishing charge. The journal responded that a \$319 retraction fee was due. (Such fees are unheard of at legitimate journals.)

I next advised the scientist to contact two editorial board members listed on the predatory journal, personal acquaintances of his, to express concern. Both replied that they had had little to do with the journal — beyond having answered an initial invitation — and would withdraw as board members. The scientist also informed the legitimate journal of the situation. Although that journal ultimately decided that

the unauthorized publication should not count against the authors, the process was burdensome for all involved. "I guess I felt 'taken,'" the scientist wrote me — "like you would if you were scammed".

As another example, a medical trainee who attended one of my outreach seminars approached me to vet a journal to which she and her adviser planned to submit. I noticed many characteristics associated with predatory journals (for guidelines, see L. Shamseer *et al. BMC Med.* 15, 28; 2017), and advised against it. She then had to navigate a difficult discussion with her adviser, who had been pressuring her to get the paper out. It was her first time preparing a manuscript; she had no concept of what standards were typical at legitimate journals and was acutely aware that her adviser, who had suggested the journal, was more experienced. Ultimately, this story has a happy ending: when she reported her concerns to her adviser, he thanked her for avoiding submission.

Even those who recognize a potential problem can fall victim. A large research group contracted my services to review its publications over the past academic year, and sent me a list of more than 200 articles. I assessed each title and found that over 5% of their publications were in predatory or otherwise low-quality journals, and estimated that the group had sent nearly US\$8,000 in total to 14 predatory journals that year — including work by one of the very people who commissioned me.

Publication ethics and integrity are at the core of scientific research, but the necessary skills are learnt informally on the job. Busy senior researchers may leave it to the first author to choose a journal, submit the work and move it through peer review. They end up with a predatory publication,

without realizing it, or realizing it too late.

In my two years as publications officer, the role has mushroomed. Still, too much of my consulting occurs after a predatory journal has been selected and papers already submitted or published.

To reduce the supply of papers flowing to predatory journals, we need to do a better job of educating trainees and faculty members about how to assess a journal's integrity. We need incentives and resources that will prevent scientists from sending real work to places that will not identify flaws or truly contribute to the scholarly literature. Several global funders have mandated open-access publishing. However, without guidance in selecting journals responsibly, this problem of irresponsible publishing is likely to increase. Science and society would be better off if we stopped the waste by cutting off the supply. ■ [SEE ALSO COMMENT P.23](#)

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RECOGNIZE  
A POTENTIAL  
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