



Lingua Franca and Beyond

A real-life experience with predatory journals: Are we smart enough to avoid them?

I would like to start with “once upon a time, there was a medical writing agency...” but no, it is not a good start; unfortunately, it has all happened quite recently.

The story goes then: one of our clients suggested open-access journal X as a target for the article we edited for them. We checked the journal on the available predatory journal lists – it was not listed. We looked at its website that claimed a full peer-reviewed process; the publication fee was high but still somewhat reasonable, and the impact factor (IF) was between 0.5 and 1.0, so everything looked quite OK. Although the paper was decent, it was still far from rocket science so the proposed IF seemed OK. We formatted it for that journal and the author submitted it.

Already on the following day – surprise, surprise – the author received a message saying that the paper was accepted in Pre QC, and was asked for permission to publish; a publication fee was mentioned “while the paper is under review”. Initially, the author accepted the fee, and 1 day later received an invoice to be paid within 3 days! The message from the editorial office said that the article was “in the final stage of publication”(!). To make it crystal clear, the message sent the day before mentioned the ongoing review process, yet the day after the paper was in the final stage of publication with not a single reviewer’s comment – just like the best paper in the world, straight to publication.

This course of events alarmed us, and having researched more carefully, the answer was clear – it was a predatory journal, owned by one of those very aggressive “publishers”. Obviously, the IF claimed on their webpage was not found in the Journal Citation Report.

Immediately, we advised our client to withdraw the article because of misleading information about the IF. They followed our recommendation, and we anxiously awaited the journal’s response. We did not have to wait long. Less than 7 hours after our client had informed the editorial office about withdrawal of the paper, the “request” to pay the withdrawal fee of more than 1300 Euro arrived. We felt strongly that this money must not be paid but we needed support.

So, we turned for advice to EMWA, specifically to Barbara Grossman, the EMWA president. Her recommendation was clear: do not pay, *basta* [Italian: (it is) enough]. Thus, the argument with the journal went on – this time, the editorial office claimed that the IF was indeed below 0.5 (as a reminder, the one displayed on the website was much higher), but it would go up to above 2 by the end of the year. Our client still refused to pay the withdrawal fee. After awhile, the withdrawal fee was reduced considerably... The author still refuses to pay and the discussion is ongoing. The last “friendly reminder” was received a couple of days ago and concerned the reduced fee.

Needless to say, the whole episode was quite stressful, and it definitely was a bad experience. On the other hand, a bad experience usually turns into a very good lesson. Our learning started with re-reading the excellent AMWA – EMWA – ISMPP Joint Position Statement on Predatory Publishing.¹ We had definitely made the right decision: we were encouraged by the statement about difficulties in distinguishing “fake journals” from proper ones, and also reassured that our recommendation to withdraw the paper was ethically correct, even though business-wise it was risky. The list of characteristics of predatory journals and their publishers was also very helpful since we planned to introduce a standard operating procedure for journal verification. Particularly useful were the points about the appearance of a journal website, a journal’s financial policy, indexing in PubMed or the Directory of Open Access Journals, the large number of journals covering everything and anything in any scientific discipline, and also details relating to members of a journal’s editorial board. We have included similar points in our checklist. We also have added a point on publication history; often these journals have published very few articles, and this was the case for us too. To summarise, our lessons learnt were:

1. Predatory journals are not hypothetical creatures that may exist somewhere in the e-space but are rather a real risk and danger that one may encounter in daily life.
2. More stringent procedures are required to

SECTION EDITORS



Maria Koltowska-Haggström

maria.koltowska-haggstrom@
propermedicalwriting.com

avoid unintentional submission to a predatory journal.

3. We were not smart enough in the past, but we hope to be smart enough in the future.

Now, an *offline* explanation to our readers:

You may wonder why I have written this article but avoided details of the journal and the publisher. Initially, I planned to disclose all these details, but I changed my mind after visiting the Stop Predatory Journals website. I was looking for the authors and owners of this website and eventually I read: *This site was built by an independent group which wishes to remain anonymous in order to avoid the harassment suffered by the creator/maintainer of ScholarlyOA.*² Being triggered by this disclaimer, I found an article explaining why Jeffrey Beall from the University of Colorado, Denver, decided to shut down his website,³ and I also looked at Scholarly OA.⁴ I have discovered a few other things that fall outside the scope of this article.

Lesson number 4: predatory journals are true predators.

References

1. AMWA – EMWA – ISMPP Joint Position Statement on Predatory Publishing, July 2019 [cited 2019 Sep 29]. Available from: <https://www.emwa.org/about-us/position-statements/joint-position-statement-on-predatory-publishing/>.
2. Stop Predatory Journals [cited 2019 Sep 29]. Available from: <https://predatoryjournals.com/about/>.
3. No More 'Beall's List' January 18, 2007 [cited 2019 Sep 29]. Available from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/18/librarians-list-predatory-journals-reportedly-removed-due-threats-and-politics>.
4. Scholarly OA [cited 2019 Sep 29]. Available from: <https://scholarlyoa.com>.