



The hijacking of peer review by authors who create false referee profiles in order to deliver favourable reviews of their own work has received prominent recent coverage in several leading journals.^{1,2} At the time of writing, over 300 articles had been retracted by affected publishers, including the likes of Elsevier, Springer, and SAGE.³

In one recent case, the focus of an editorial,⁴ the *British Journal of Clinical Chemistry* was duped by the authors of a meta-review of therapies for heart failure patients.⁵ The authors suggested two referees (both cardiologists at top US universities), and the journal contravened its own policy by using both of them – and no other referees. The journal's editors did not see anything odd in the fact that both requested reviews arrived within a week, were very short and overwhelmingly positive, and displayed clumsy English that was not compatible with them having been written by leading US-based academics. More understandably, perhaps, they failed to notice that the email addresses for both referees were non-institutional, i.e. unverifiable. Catastrophic methodological errors were also missed.

This deception might have gone unnoticed had a couple of sharp-eyed readers not outlined the paper's many flaws in a scathing letter to the editor.⁴ Acting decisively, the journal managed to trace one of the named referees, who claimed to know nothing about the review. After receiving an inadequate explanation from the authors, *Br J Clin Chem* issued a prompt retraction notice,⁶ redeeming itself somewhat by adhering

to the COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) guidelines.⁷ Importantly, the retraction notice is freely available and the retracted article can still be accessed but now boasts an unmistakable translucent "RETRACTED" watermark.

So, what can be done about fraud of this kind? The *Br J Clin Chem* editors feel that additional measures to prevent similar misconduct would likely fail and risk inconveniencing honest researchers.⁴ In any case, they believe their existing peer review procedures, if followed properly, are adequate. They consider themselves too busy to check study details themselves and feel that it is not their job anyway. Rather, they insist that responsibility for assuring research quality lies with the institutions where the research is performed. But how much oversight do such institutions actually have?

There are no easy fixes, and resourceful fraudsters will always find a way around any new barrier that is placed in their way. But *Br J Clin Chem* has at least identified two simple ways to minimise the problem: don't rely solely on authors' suggested referees and insist that institutional email addresses be used for correspondence with referees.⁴

References

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