



## Winners of the Geoff Hall Scholarship Essay Competition

### Dear all,

You will be reading this during unprecedented quarantine or lockdown (depending on your geographical location). My thoughts and prayers are with you all.

The Geoff Hall Scholarships are given in honour of a former president of EMWA. Geoff was a very special person, an extremely valued member of EMWA, and a very good friend to many EMWA members. He firmly believed that the future of EMWA lies in our new and potential members, and so it's a very fitting legacy that we have the Scholarship Awards in his memory. The scholarships are awarded annually on the basis of an essay competition, and the title of this year's essay was "How would you go about identifying a predatory journal?" This year's scholarship

### FOR CORRESPONDENCE



**Lisa Chamberlain James**  
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winners were Adriana Rocha and Petal Smart.

**Adriana Rocha** has a degree in biochemistry from Portugal, which was followed by a PhD in medical neurosciences in Germany. After a postdoc in the USA, she decided to leave academic research and transition into industry. She is now a freelance medical writer.

**Petal Smart** is a veterinary surgeon by training. Over the past 5 years, she has been a medical/science editor serving primarily non-native English-speaking authors. She has a keen interest in regulatory affairs as they relate to

medical devices, both those intended for human use and those intended for veterinary use.

Adriana's and Petal's winning essays are presented below, and we wish them the very best at the start of their very promising medical writing careers. For those of you inspired to pick up your laptop, and are looking for something to fill your time during quarantine, the essay title for this year's upcoming competition is "Do you have what it takes to be a medical writer? Discuss three attributes or skills that best qualify one to be a medical writer".

I hope to read your essays soon and stay safe all until we see each other at the next EMWA conference.

Bestest,  
**Lisa**



### Investigate: What is a predatory journal?

#### Why it is a problem and what are the dangers?

For the last 15 years, predatory journal numbers have exploded.<sup>1</sup> Such journals are not legitimate scientific publications and their business model consists of for-profit publishing, where the peer-review process is mostly non-existent and there is no concern for the scientific accuracy of the published content. They are an obvious danger for the integrity of the scientific method and conflating predatory journal articles with actual scientific content is not only a waste of knowledge, time and resources: it undermines the value of legitimate published scientific research.<sup>1-3</sup>

But if they are so unethical, why have these journals been booming? Unfortunately, most universities and institutions evaluate researchers by their publication output, forcing them to publish often and regularly to maintain their professional standing. In this context, a journal that promises a quick publication process can

be very attractive, especially to less-experienced researchers who are not aware of the risks.<sup>1-3</sup>

Sometimes even experienced researchers can unknowingly submit an article to a predatory journal. When the authors realise they are dealing with a predatory publication and wish to retract the article, the journals will usually charge a retraction fee.<sup>4</sup> A few publications even list respected professionals as board members who have never agreed to do so and only discovered it when contacted by a fellow researcher.<sup>5</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, some researchers will deliberately use predatory journals and, for a fee, increase their number of publications solely to advance their career with no concern for ethics and scientific accuracy.<sup>3</sup>

In their quest to denounce predatory journals, some researchers have shown how easy it is to scam your way to a publication. In 2013,

John Bohannon had his fake (and flawed) research article accepted for publication by 157 of 304 open access journals, contingent upon payment of publication fees.<sup>6</sup> Katarzyna Pisanski and colleagues also showed how to easily join an editorial board of a predatory journal. They created a profile of a fictitious scientist named Anna O. Szust and applied on her behalf to the editorial boards of 360 journals. Oszust is the Polish word for fraud and the scientist's CV was clearly unqualified for an editorial role. In many cases, they received a positive response within days and even hours of application. Four titles immediately appointed Szust editor-in-chief (!) and at least a dozen journals appointed Szust as an editor, conditional upon some form of payment.<sup>7</sup>

All these examples illustrate the lack of ethical practices and the for-profit nature of predatory journals. But new journals are being

launched every week, how can we know if they are legitimate or not? How do we safely recognise a predatory journal?

## Identify: How to recognise a predatory journal

In the face of such an extensive number of fraudulent publications, many organisations are recognising the problem and advising their members on how to better recognise and identify a predatory journal.<sup>1,2,8,9</sup>

Usually, a predatory journal will send emails to researchers requesting article submission and promising a fast and easy publication process. Afterwards, the fees charged are suspicious (too high or too low) and very often payable upon article submission. Further investigation reveals that they often have a legitimate-sounding name (in fact just a variation of an original legitimate publication), and possibly an unprofessional website, with fake addresses and grammatical errors. Upon further inspection, it is revealed the journal is not indexed on recognised citation systems such as PubMed<sup>10</sup> nor listed within an accredited online directory such as the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ),<sup>11</sup> The DOAJ lists legitimate open access journals: it grants some journals the DOAJ seal, a mark of certification for open access journals for the achievement of a high level of openness, adhering to best practices, and having high publishing standards. As of September 2019, it listed 13,776 journals in 130 countries. In any case, it should be mentioned that the DOAJ is not a comprehensive list of all legitimate open access journals and a journal that is not listed should not be assumed to be predatory. In addition, the listing itself does not guarantee legitimacy, but the DOAJ has a routine mechanism for users to notify DOAJ if they find a journal with questionable practices.<sup>11</sup>

One very useful tool that indexed fraudulent publications was Beall's list of predatory publishers. From 2011 to January 2017, Jeffrey Beall, a librarian and associate professor at the University of Colorado, compiled annual lists of potential, possible, or probably predatory open access journals.<sup>12</sup> As of January 3, 2017, it listed 1155 predatory publishers and 1294 predatory

journals.<sup>2</sup> However, on January 17, 2017, Beall's website was shut down for unclear reasons.<sup>13</sup>

## Inform: Where to find more up-to-date information Share it with other professionals

As mentioned previously, new journals are being constantly created and ultimately it is the researcher's responsibility to ascertain which are legitimate or predatory. Not one method is full-proof: the best process involves a combination of techniques, such as applying the criteria for predatory journals, seeing if they are listed on the DOAJ or other online directories and contact other senior colleagues to see if they have heard of the journal.

A useful tool to systematise this analysis comes from "Think. Check. Submit." – an online checklist developed by a coalition of scholarly publishing organisations. Again, this is merely a way to better guide your research into a particular journal and incorporate all the criteria mentioned previously.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, *you* have an individual, scientific and ethical responsibility to identify and avoid predatory journals and only publish in legitimate publications. In this era of fake news, it is up to us – researchers, medical writers, editors, and respective organisations – to inform and educate, so that science is peer-reviewed, reliable, and rigorous.<sup>14</sup>

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### How would you go about identifying a predatory journal?

You are anxious to make progress – in your career, your research – the faster, the better. However, the publish-or-perish “jungle” is dark and murky. You can barely see what lies ahead. Your instincts remind you that “they” are out there, to get you – by any means necessary. You are the prey and “they” are the predatory journals. They want your blood, sweat, and hard-earned reputation for less-than-noble purposes.

Cohen et al.<sup>1</sup> define a predatory journal as “an exploitative open-access academic publishing business model that involves charging publication fees to authors without providing the editorial and publishing services typically associated with legitimate journals”. Although early-career researchers are more likely to be preyed upon, more experienced scientists are not exempt, and may be targeted to serve as editors or reviewers.

Scientists should think of predatory publishers as similar to counterfeit money. They may

appear to be authentic, but you need to look very closely with an analytical eye to determine their legitimacy.

Because predatory journals may go to extreme lengths to convince you of their supposed legitimacy, you need to be alert to detect the subtle signs of deception. If something appears to be questionable, it probably is. Thus, researchers should also trust their instincts. Although the following guidelines are by no means exhaustive or even fool-proof, you should consider the following:

#### Website

Is there a legitimate, up-to-date website for the journal? Are the journal name and website URL unique, or do they very closely resemble those of another well-established publication? Are there spelling errors on the website of the journal? Does the website resemble a sales pitch to authors, or does it appeal to its target audience?

#### Contact details

Does the website clearly list the editorial staff and their full contact details (email, telephone, physical mailing address)? Does the last part of the email address correspond with the official website of the journal, or is it a freely available email address from one of the popular email providers (e.g., Gmail, Yahoo, or Hotmail)? For instance, if their website is *legitimatepublisher.com*, do you have to email the editor at *editor@legitimatepublisher.com*, or *editor.predatorypublisher@gmail.com*?

You should try to contact the editor with a pertinent question and see whether you receive a response. In some cases, there may be glaring disparities. For instance, is the editorial address for the *European Journal of XYZ* really based anywhere in Europe?

#### Editorial staff

Who are the editor-in-chief and managing editor? What are their backgrounds? Can you verify their

credentials? Do their credentials match the subject matter of the journal?

Even if you are investigating one particular journal, do a quick check of the editorial staff of other journals published by the same publisher. Is the same editor responsible for various journals in unrelated subjects? Unlike language editors and copy editors (who are quite capable of checking manuscripts in various subjects for errors in syntax, grammar, spelling, accuracy, etc.), journal editors are usually specialists in their particular field. Therefore, their background should match the subject matter of the journal for which they are listed as an editor.

Does the editor have a list of publications themselves? The purpose of this evaluation should not be to discriminate against any particular scientist. However, it is more likely that an experienced scientist would be qualified to assume an editorial or leadership role at an academic publication.

Can the publications and credentials of the editors be searched for and found online? In some cases, the editors listed may be fictitious names. In other cases, legitimate scientists may not even be aware that they are listed as editors on the websites of some predatory journals.

## Peer review

Is this process reasonably rigorous? A legitimate journal would want to impose a certain measure of scientific rigor to ensure quality control. Is the length of time or the process of peer review remarkably short? Is the process of submission for review incredibly easy or “too good to be true?”

How many reviewers are typically selected? One, two, three, or more? Are any reviewers selected at all? Is the process transparent and is this information readily available in the information for authors or submission guidelines? Are you able to recommend any reviewers? Are there processes in place to respond to reviewers’ comments and suggestions and resubmit the manuscript?

Although predatory journals may claim to conduct peer review and mimic the structure of legitimate journals, they publish all or most submitted material without external peer review. They often disregard policies “advocated

by organisations such as the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), and the Council of Science Editors (CSE) regarding issues such as archiving of journal content, management of potential conflicts of interest, handling of errata, and transparency of journal processes and policies including fees.”<sup>2</sup>

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## Impact factor

Are there processes in place to monitor the number of times articles have been cited? (Keep in mind, it may take at least a year or two for a new journal to establish this.) Does the journal itself cite a reputable impact metric (e.g., Web of Science, CrossRef, or Altmetric)? Does the website clearly state how the

articles are processed and archived for future citation or referencing?

## Copyright

Who retains rights to the published articles, and is this clearly stated in the information for authors or submission guidelines? In an open access model, the authors usually retain rights, as opposed to the publisher.

## Other general considerations

Although scientists have referred to Beall’s list for a number of years, because it was originally compiled and maintained by one individual, its reliability has been called into question, and it now exists only as an online archive.<sup>2</sup>

Other resources, such as the “Think. Check. Submit” initiative,<sup>3</sup> and the Directory of Open Access Journals are useful resources that should be consulted when preparing to submit research for publication.

Keep in mind that predatory journals are money-making enterprises. Therefore, when confronted with predators in the “jungle”, think of their driving force, trust your “survival” instincts, and be alert to their deceptive practices.

## References

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