

Confronting the Rise of Predatory Publishing: Implications for Public Health Research and Practice.

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Introduction

The proliferation of scientific research and the democratization of knowledge through open access publishing have significantly advanced public health over the past few decades. However, these positive developments have been undermined by the rise of predatory publishing—a practice that exploits the open access model for profit without providing legitimate editorial services or rigorous peer review. The increasing number of predatory publishers poses a substantial threat to the integrity of scientific literature, misguides policy decisions, and wastes valuable resources. This editorial addresses the escalating issue of predatory publishing, its detrimental effects on public health research and practice, and proposes actionable solutions to mitigate its impact.

The Increasing Number of Predatory Publishers

Predatory publishers are entities that prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, lack of transparency, and aggressive solicitation of manuscripts¹. The phenomenon has escalated alarmingly; a study by Shen and Björk (2015) reported that the number of articles published in predatory journals increased from 53,000 in 2010 to 420,000 in 2014². This trend has continued, with recent analyses indicating that predatory journals now publish hundreds of thousands of articles annually³.

Several factors contribute to this rise. The "publish or perish" culture in academia pressures researchers to increase their publication output, sometimes at the expense of quality. Additionally, the open access movement, while noble in intent, has inadvertently provided a fertile ground for unscrupulous publishers who exploit the author-pays model⁴. The ease of establishing online journals with minimal oversight further exacerbates the problem. The ramifications of predatory publishing are multifaceted and deeply concerning.

Erosion of Scientific Integrity

Predatory journals often bypass rigorous peer review, leading to the dissemination of unverified or low-quality research⁵. This undermines the credibility of scientific literature, making it challenging for practitioners and policymakers to distinguish between legitimate findings and flawed studies. In public health, where research directly informs

interventions and policies, such misinformation can have dire consequences.

Financial Exploitation of Researchers

Researchers, especially those early in their careers or from low-resource settings, are prime targets for predatory publishers. They may be lured by promises of rapid publication and wide dissemination, only to be charged exorbitant fees without receiving the expected editorial services⁶. This not only strains their limited resources but also affects their professional reputation.

Unsolicited Emails and Harassment

Predatory publishers aggressively solicit manuscripts through unsolicited emails, often using flattery or pressure tactics⁷. These communications can be persistent and intrusive, diverting researchers' time and attention. The barrage of emails also poses cybersecurity risks, as they may contain phishing attempts or malware.

Impact on Public Health Policies

The inclusion of flawed studies from predatory journals in systematic reviews and meta-analyses can skew results, leading to ineffective or harmful public health policies⁸. This is particularly dangerous during health crises, such as pandemics, where timely and accurate information is crucial.

Solutions to the Problem of Predatory Publishing

Addressing predatory publishing requires a multifaceted approach involving researchers, institutions, publishers, and policymakers. Raising awareness about predatory publishers is the first line of defense. Academic institutions should incorporate training on publication ethics and how to identify predatory journals into their curricula⁹. Tools like the "Think. Check. Submit." checklist help researchers assess the credibility of journals before submitting their work¹⁰.

Universities and research institutions should establish clear policies that discourage publishing in predatory journals. This includes recognizing and rewarding quality over quantity in publication records during hiring, promotion, and tenure evaluations¹¹. Institutions can also provide support services to help researchers identify reputable journals.

National and international bodies should develop regulatory frameworks to monitor and sanction predatory publishers. This could involve legal actions against fraudulent practices and establishing official lists of recognized journals¹². Collaboration between governments, academic

societies, and publishing organizations is essential to enforce these regulations.

Indexing services like PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science play a critical role in validating journal quality. By applying stringent criteria for inclusion, these databases can exclude predatory journals, reducing their visibility and impact 13. Researchers should rely on indexed journals to ensure the credibility of their sources. Developing algorithms and software tools to detect and flag predatory journals can aid researchers and librarians 14. Machine learning techniques can analyze journal websites, submission processes, and editorial practices to identify red flags.

Conclusion

The rise of predatory publishing is a pressing issue that threatens the foundation of scientific research and public health advancements. It compromises the quality of evidence available to practitioners and policymakers, leading to potential misinformed decisions that can affect population health outcomes. Combating this challenge requires collective action to promote ethical publishing practices, educate researchers, and enforce regulations against unscrupulous publishers. By safeguarding the integrity of scientific literature, we can ensure that public health policies and interventions are based on sound evidence, ultimately improving health outcomes globally.

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