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To publish and perish: A Faustian bargain or a Hobson's choice



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ABSTRACT

As a matter of career choice, doctors have to choose between becoming an 'academic' or a 'practitioner.' To conduct research and publish articles in scientific journals is compulsory for the academic professional and mostly optional for the latter. The Medical Council of India has revised the eligibility qualifications for medical teachers over the past decade, and has now come out with regulations for streamlining the process of promotion by focusing on scientific papers, apart from clarifying on required experience and qualifications. 'Predatory publishers' are proliferating across the world, exploiting the reach of the Internet, and are enticing naïve professionals to publish their research work with them. The pitfalls of paid publishing in such journals may tarnish upcoming careers if doctors are not cautious. For a price, there are many publishers who will process articles without even rudimentary peer review; and for the sake of padding up of the resume, this Faustian bargain may eventually prove detrimental to authors, and thus with their professional credibility at stake, may prove to be a Hobson's choice. It is suggested for authors to make a wise choice and a correct decision when selecting a journal to submit their manuscripts.

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There comes a time in every doctor's career when he decides the path he shall choose, whether to be an 'academician,' teaching future generations of doctors, or a 'practitioner,' tending to the healthcare needs of a burgeoning population. In the years past, this was not much of a dilemma to the diligent disciple of Hippocrates, as one could teach medical students as a pastime, as a hobby, or as a full-time vocation. It was also said that those who could, did, and those who couldn't, taught!

With increasing regulatory pressure, the Medical Council of India has been enhancing the eligibility qualifications for medical teachers over the past decade, and has now come out with Regulations for Teachers, thereby ostensibly streamlining the process of promotion and introducing objective criteria.¹

In the years since the changes began, there was ambiguity among the teaching fraternity about the nature of the scientific

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Box 1. Eligibility requirements for Teachers (in addition to academic qualifications and experience)

Associate professor
Professor

Two publications
Four publications

publications that were desirable or mandatory. This invariably led to a plethora of articles in all formats being submitted or processed around the times that inspections of medical colleges were anticipated. This in turn encouraged the entrepreneurial streak among our fellow men, who capitalized on the need of our teachers to teach, and to have the necessary number of 'publications' to ensure that they could continue to do so! Thus was spawned a whole new genre of journal, the omniscient Online Journal, with on-demand single print editions.

With the proliferation of medical colleges of all hues, medical education is being recognized as a lucrative business model with viability analyses revealing opportunities.² The demand for experienced teachers of medicine has expanded, and compliance issues often crop up, with the recognition of these teachers at their various posts being at stake.

To comply with the requirements of the MCI, there is a need for teachers to be promoted periodically, and for such teachers to have the scientific credentials for such promotions. Thus, scientific publications have been selected as a surrogate measure for academic rigor or acceptance. At every stage in the process of transition from a novice teacher to an accomplished professor, MCI requires the person to have published a specified number of articles at each level. Recently, the nature of such publications has also been clarified.³ As with every new policy, there are contrarian perspectives too,⁴ and the discerning reader may find it advisable to arrive at a balanced opinion based on an analysis of various viewpoints (Box 1).

Thus, with pressure on performance, and the desire for academic recognition, medical teachers are now being driven literally to 're-search'.⁵ An intellectual debate, probably after much soul searching, concluded that research should be mandatory for teachers, and research publications should be one of the requirements for academic promotions.⁶

Penetration of the Internet, and proliferation of e-commerce, has led to many novice authors succumbing to easy temptation and submitting their work for publication in 'psuedo-journals.' The contentious pitfalls of publishing in such journals, and the need to caution healthcare professionals, has sparked a virtual deluge of articles and editorials on the subject. A simple Pubmed search of the term 'predatory publishing,' revealed, interestingly, a preponderance of nursing and allied healthcare journals, rather than conventional mainstream medical journals. The paradigm of 'predatory publishing' has been commented on in an earlier issue of this journal too.⁷ Exploitative and commercial interests of these publishers are like predators awaiting their unsuspecting prey, a naïve author from among our community. A comprehensive and updated list of such journals and publishers of disrepute is maintained by Beall.⁸ When we introspect as to why do many among our

learned brethren fall prey to such academic predators, we may find that the answer probably has its origins in the highly competitive 'publish or perish' research environment in academia in the developed world. This academic milieu has now percolated to the developing countries as well.⁹ The inexperienced may consider it a Faustian bargain to pay the upfront publishing fees upwards of \$100, and pad up their resumes with these 'pseudo' publications. However, under harsh academic scrutiny, this may not eventually prove to be of any value and may even be a Hobson's choice, where professional credibility is put at stake.

In recent years, open access publishing has become more than a buzzword and is now a phenomenon in academic publishing that has brought in much confusion and varying connotations for authors and readers alike. The open access model represents a paradigm shift change in the business model in the publishing world, which involves a transition from a 'pay-for-access' to a 'pay-for-publishing' process.

Predatory publishing is very different from the ethical and scholarly practice of open access that is offered by reputable publishers.¹⁰ Unfortunately, along with the ease of digital publishing, questionable journals and dubious publishers have emerged, probably not grounded in high editorial standards and ascribing to poor publishing quality. Some are actively engaged in competing for authors and revenue. In extreme cases, such publishers engage in unethical or unscrupulous marketing practices to solicit unsuspecting authors, in order to maximize their revenue. Such journals might also target senior medical professionals to enhance the journal's credibility. Although open access offers great opportunities for knowledge dissemination and improved practices, as a disruptive force in academic publishing, there is also the clear potential for exploitation, and the promotion of 'pseudo-science.' It is perceived to be our responsibility to continue to maintain high standards of academic and health sciences publishing that can be readily implemented across various publication modalities.¹¹

Foreseeing the future, Banerjee commented against this 'polluted publication background.' It is indeed imperative that academic institutions and regulatory bodies have a system of distinguishing genuine from fake publications, so that honest and meritorious authors are rewarded. Serious researchers who refrain from publishing with predatory publishers shall be left behind in the race of academic recognition unless regulatory bodies wake up and distinguish genuine from disingenuous articles.¹²

The right journal, the right publisher, and the right publishing ethics, together, equal an opportunity for quality dissemination of an author's work. Authors should seek to publish in a journal that meets the intended audience needs, is supported by an ethical publisher, and has quality content experts as peer reviewers who assist the author in publishing a manuscript that is archived for future generations.¹³

Predatory publishers can be identified by a laundry list of telltale signs (Box 2). Although not a definite indication of a problem as many excellent journals publish only online, predatory publishers do not usually invest in paper publishing. Authors who choose to publish with predatory publishers are usually asked to pay in foreign currency (US\$) for their

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