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Editorial

Predatory publishing houses: Challenging the legitimacy of open access journals

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As the volume of research material produced by the world's academic and student community continues to grow exponentially (in excess of 10,000 papers submitted per month), and with it an increasing demand for public forums through which to disseminate this learning, open access publishing has been embraced by publishers and authors alike. The Australasian Journal of Paramedicine (AJP) is one of many who have embraced the effective and cost-efficient open access publication of research in order to reach the greatest number of people in the field of paramedicine, research that may otherwise not have made the cut through sheer volume rather than quality.

Unfortunately, with the evolution of any new method or technology, there is a risk of exploitation by individuals and groups who would seek to profit from the integrity of others. Academia has long been relatively immune to commercial fraud in publication, yet recently there has been a flood of activity aimed at removing money from the pockets of those seeking to enrich the world via knowledge.

The field of pre-hospital emergency care is particularly susceptible to the challenges of producing and disseminating evidence for practice in the form of research. Largely dominated by well-established journals in the fields of medicine and nursing, there are very few opportunities for paramedics to publish review articles and simple unfunded studies in a domain that is representative of their profession. It is through journals such as the AJP that we seek to provide a greater public forum for paramedic and student research. For the editorial and management team at AJP, the open access format is both pragmatic and efficient, and although maintaining this format will provide challenges, our efforts will continue to focus on improving the quality of published pre-hospital evidence available and to enable further evolution of paramedic practice.

The system of open access publication is essentially different from that of traditional publishing in that, instead of having authors submit papers for peer-review then having advertisers and subscribers pay for the cost of publication, the authors pay a fee in advance (the AJP does not charge authors a fee to submit or publish their work). This then opens their work to a greater audience than the subscription network, as the paper is available free to any person logging on to the AJP website. This would seem at face value to be a great leap forward in knowledge dissemination and access to important studies by researchers and readers.

Predatory publishers however, employ strategies that demean the open access format and diminish the reputation of authors. They accomplish this through aggressive marketing campaigns and endless spamming of authors who have published in reputable journals, the use of questionable peer-review, false association of respected researchers on editorial committees, and publishing papers on sites that are no more than simple blogs. All of which adds up to poor quality publishing and little benefit to authors who have worked hard on their research project and producing their papers.

One generic scam is to send spam emails to authors, inviting them to submit to a new journal with a respected board. The journal will often have an office in the United States (however, this is often only a post box) but operates out of countries such as India and China, and the reply mail is not a United States email account (check the country code in the email address). If you do submit your work, it is often read over by the 'editorial team' who may simply run a spelling and grammar check on a word-processing program and then publish the paper on a blog site within 2 weeks. The author will then receive an invoice for up to US\$2000. Following this, as the authors realise the low quality of their submission, and its poor access to the academic community, they will attempt to withdraw the paper. Unfortunately, the publishing house is not technically in breach of existing laws, as it has performed some degree of peer-review and then published the work online. This leads to a 'negotiation' process, and authors often find themselves relieved of a few hundred dollars while their hard work stagnates in an unnoticed corner of the internet.

So how do you spot a good journal? A quality journal will have an established board and editorial team whose credentials can be confirmed by a simple Google search to identify their other work and institution. Peer-review will be clearly defined and rigorous. The publisher should be reputable, such as Elsevier, Springer and Wiley or associated with a professional association, such as Paramedics Australasia. The journal will be indexed by a reputable bibliographic database, such as MEDLINE (PubMed), EMBASE or CINAHL. The journal should also have a consistent publication schedule with recent issues available for viewing.

It is imperative that emerging fields such as pre-hospital emergency care, and existing fields such as medicine and nursing, are protected from this type of predatory activity. So a few words of warning to the uninitiated: if you receive unsolicited emails requesting article submission for new journals, offering editorial board positions, inviting you to present at conferences that you have never heard of (and where often Nobel Laureates are allegedly scheduled to appear), or any other variant of these, beware.

In this issue of AJP, we have a mix of articles starting with a commentary by Gavin Smith about the experience of international clinical placements for paramedic students (1). The article by Stratton and colleagues looks at the usefulness of residential aged care clinical placements by Australian undergraduate paramedic students (2). The article by Leahy describes the medical planning process and medical team roles for the national Surf Life Saving Championships that took place in Perth during early 2014 (3). The article by Keene and colleagues takes a look at patients who were seen and assessed by paramedics and not transported, something that certainly needs further investigation (4). The final article is a student-led one by Collins and some fellow students, with some guidance from A/Prof Smith, that looks at the pre-hospital use of in-line fluid warmers (5).

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