

EDITORIAL

BREAKS IN REPORTING OF RESEARCH RESULTS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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Scholarly publications are expected to provide detailed and honest records of research outputs. Because publications form the basis for both new research and the application of findings, they can affect not only the research community but also, indirectly, the society at large. Researchers, therefore, have the responsibility to ensure that their publications are honest, clear, accurate, complete and balanced, and avoid misleading, selective or ambiguous reporting. These standards of conduct for scientific researchers must be governed by research ethics. It has long been established that researchers should adhere to ethical principles in order to protect the dignity, rights and welfare of research participants. Indeed, the World Health Organization (WHO) upholds the basic principle that health research must be of the highest ethical standards (1,2).

It is imperative that all research involving human beings are reviewed by ethics committees to ensure that central ethical principles are observed and appropriate ethical standards are maintained (3). As outlined in the position statement developed at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity (4), research should be conducted in an ethical and responsible manner and the results be presented clearly, honestly, and without fabrication, falsification or inappropriate data manipulation. Researchers should strive to describe their methods clearly and unambiguously so that their findings can be confirmed by others. They should also adhere to publication requirements including that submitted work is original, is not plagiarized, and has not been published elsewhere. The national guidelines also assert that ethical standards need to be maintained in the planning, conduct and dissemination of research results (5).

Unethical research is prevented through research ethics committees which undertake independent reviews of scientific protocols and monitor the conduct and dissemination of results. In settings like Ethiopia, research ethics committees are often under-resourced and pools of trained personnel to serve on these are insufficient (6). As authors, researchers should take a collective responsibility for their work and, in their submissions, accurately reflect individuals' contributions to the work and disclose relevant conflicts of interest. They should ensure that all authors meet the authorship criteria and ensure publishers' requirements are met before submission of manuscripts for publication. Editors should be informed if and when authors withdraw their work from review. They have the responsibility for ensuring the integrity of the research literature as set out in companion guidelines (1-4).

The Ethiopian Medical Journal (EMJ) laid the grounds for formal peer-reviewed health research publication in 1962. EMJ emphasized in an editorial in 2005 the need for living by the code in clinical research to ensure that ethical standards are observed in scientific publishing (7). EMJ has also highlighted the accountability of authors and the interface between research institutions and scientific journals(8). EMJ has also issued updated guidelines for authors including ethical considerations associated with manuscripts submitted to the journal (9). In spite of these efforts to protect the scientific integrity and ethical standards in the conduct and dissemination of research work, startling and deplorable breaks/breaches continue to occur. Some of the ethical breaches and/or negligence (incompetence) encountered have emanated from weak enforcement or total lack of strong regulatory and ethical review processes within institutions and shortage of skilled human resources with expertise in ethics in health research (9,10).

Recent trends show that some authors submit manuscripts concurrently to EMJ and other journal(s), while having submitted signed testimonials that the manuscripts have not been submitted elsewhere. Examples of such manuscripts included: (i) skin snip survey in Bale, Borena; (ii) perioperative complications of trabeculectomy at a tertiary eye center; (iii) utilization of health services for mental and emotional reasons in Addis Ababa; (iv) assessment of renal function and electrolytes in patients with thyroid dysfunction, Addis Ababa; (v) prevalence of rheumatic heart disease among primary school students in mid-eastern Ethiopia; and (vi) human papillomavirus related cervical cancer and anticipated vaccination challenges in Ethiopia. This is a trend that authors, reviewers and editors as well as the scientific community at large, cannot and should not condone. Authors do have the right to withdraw their manuscripts; but should do this in a transparent, responsible and accountable way. Withdrawing an accepted manuscript at the copy-editing stage and informing the Journal of its publication elsewhere is unprofessional.

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Various recommendations have been made for researchers to observe stringent ethical standards. Education in research ethics and enforcement of good practices by institutions must be enhanced based on lessons learnt (10,11). All stakeholders, research and academic institutions in particular, should take stringent measures to ensure that publications in predatory journals (12) are not considered in the evaluation of individuals for academic promotion. We call up on stakeholders including research institutions, funders, and professional societies to play their respective roles and for editors and publishers to promote the application of ethical principles at all levels. A more conducive environment needs to be created to foster research and the dissemination of results in a timely and honest manner.

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