

Editorial

Ensuring responsible conduct of research and publications in Sri Lankan context: an eye-opener

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Over the last year, we identified and handled a few unethical practices related to publication ethics concerning several manuscripts under consideration for AMJ. These included plagiarism, duplicate submissions, redundant publications, and manuscripts submitted without the awareness of the co-authors. As a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), AMJ handled these issues based on the COPE core practices for journal editors (1), resulting in the rejection of several manuscripts for publication and notifying another journal about redundant publications leading to a retraction. COPE first developed guidelines for good publication practices in 1999 and the original code of conduct in 2004, followed by a revised code of conduct in 2007 and introduced core practices in 2017(1). However, in addition to the adherence to guidelines in handling individual incidents of publication misconduct, as editors, we believe that we also have an essential role in educating the researchers, most importantly, the amateurs.

Research and publication misconduct has a long history and is nothing new in the rapidly expanding publishing world (2,3). The foundation of the entire scientific research process, including scientific communications, is a self-regulating and self-policing process built on trust, honesty and goodwill; hence, misconduct is an easy option for researchers (4–6). Research misconduct is defined as behaviour by a researcher, intentional or not, that

falls short of good ethical and scientific standards. This includes data fabrication, data falsification, data suppression, or inappropriate manipulation of data; inappropriate image manipulation; plagiarism; misleading reporting; redundant publication; authorship malpractice such as guest or ghost authorship; failure to disclose funding sources or competing interests; misreporting of funder involvement; and any form of unethical research (4,7). There could be many reasons for research misconduct and unethical publication practices among informed researchers, such as immense pressure for publications; 'publish or perish', competition for funding and promotion or career advancement, pushing the researcher to intentionally commit such misconduct at the cost of breaching the academic integrity (8). However, a lack of awareness and emphasis on research and publication ethics too may contribute to some forms of research misconduct and unethical publication practices.

The enthusiasm to publish research among medical doctors in Sri Lanka is rising due to academic, occupational and various other motives. In Sri Lanka, there are increasing numbers of research-based master's and doctoral programs related to health sciences conducted by state universities. Many postgraduate medical programs at MD and MSc levels also include research components where the candidates are required to publish their research

in the fulfillment the requirement for the completion of the degree. In addition, the undergraduate medicine (MBBS) programs in Sri Lanka include research projects as part of the core curricula. The Ministry of Health and the Universities employees are motivated for the research by paying a 'research allowance' for research projects culminating in publications. Realistically, most of the above-stated research projects are conducted with many obstacles, notably limited funding, limited resources and with data backed by less than ideal laboratory procedures. Such place them in an improbable position to get published in high-impact international journals overcoming stricter scientific scrutiny. However, despite that, the opportunity for amateur medical researchers in Sri Lanka to publish their research in local journals with high visibility is promising. Of the 121 journals currently supported by the Sri Lanka Journals Online (SLJOL), 36 are medical journals, including AMJ. Most of these medical journals are published by professional colleges related to medicine and medical professional associations; hence no article processing fees are charged. Therefore, there's enough local space to support amateur researchers to get their research published. Altogether, this has created a research-promoting environment with potential benefits for medical research in Sri Lanka. However, to go in parallel with that, is there adequate emphasis on the promotion of 'good' research practices to ensure the standards of research and publication ethics? Are there formal mechanisms to ensure adequate awareness of ethical research and publication practices among local researchers?

The amateur health science researchers in Sri Lanka at the undergraduate and graduate levels may have little experience in publishing research and may not always be guided by eminent researchers with a wealth of experience in scientific publishing. Therefore, the institutes that offer health-science degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate levels must ensure that an environment fostering responsible research for candidates is maintained. Its also pivotal to ensure that the research carried out as part of the degree programmes are done in line

with the research and publication ethical standards and the candidates possess adequate knowledge on research and publication ethics. Not only the institutes having research as a core function, but any institutional body that approves monetary incentives to motivate research among the employees, such as research allowances, must ensure that such research studies are conducted by the employees, ensuring the academic integrity and ethical standards. For that, steps such as establishing policies, forming committees or appointing officers responsible for monitoring, educating and ensuring research integrity and good practices are of high necessity while encouraging and not subduing the original passion for research (9). Unfortunately, at present, no formal system is in place at the national level in Sri Lanka. Based on a recommendation made through a guidance document on good academic research practices, the University Grants Commission of India has made recommendations that all universities and institutions in the country to set up research integrity offices (5,10), a lesson to be learnt for us. At the same time, the responsibility of the journal editors, editorial boards and reviewers should extend beyond ensuring the proper peer-review and editorial decision process. They need to be adequately trained and should be knowledgeable, vigilant, and proactive in preventing misconduct related to research and publication ethics.

For very salient reasons, the necessity for local medical research and publishing has climbed up. Also, a similar trend of rising the number of local medical journals is evident. Nonetheless, maintaining integrity, good practices, and ethics in the process is becoming a serious challenge. It is high time now for all, including researchers, journal editors, relevant institutes, and professional bodies, to play their roles responsibly towards ethical and upstanding conduct of medical research and publications. The bid is for an effective change in research and publication culture while not overburdening the available limited resources or overstressing the researchers.

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