

The rise and rise of predatory journals and the risks to clinical practice, health and careers: the APAME 2024 Sydney declaration on predatory or pseudo journals and publishers

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On 28–30 August 2024, the annual meeting of the Asia Pacific Association of Medical Journal Editors (APAME) was held at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales. APAME is a non-governmental, non-partisan, non-profit organisation that supports and promotes medical journalism in the Asia–Pacific region. It provides a forum for education and exchange of ideas and interacts with numerous organisations around the world, including the World Health Organization, to fulfill its mission. This year, APAME issued the *Sydney declaration on predatory or pseudo journals and publishers* (Box). “Predatory journals” can be defined as those “which actively solicit manuscripts and charge publications fees without providing robust peer review and editorial services”.¹ However, there is a continuum from predatory to low quality publishing behaviour and even reputable journals are not immune to providing low quality services on occasion.

Over the last quarter century, medical journals have undergone significant change in how they are published, and virtually all academic journals are now wholly or predominantly available online. Most new journals are fully online. At the same time, there has been a move towards open access publishing to make medical knowledge more globally accessible, thus reducing inequity in knowledge access. Open access has become mandated by many grant-funding organisations and embraced by many researchers. Open access requires a shift of financial model from consumers — largely institutions paying for access to academic journals — to the authors or their institutions paying for work to be universally available to all readers. Although there is a diverse variety of open access models, including access through university repositories and consortial support for open access journals, one model, in which open access is paid for at the level of individual articles, can be particularly problematic. Not only can this model lead to inequity in ability to pay (ie, if authors are not affiliated with institutions that can support open access), it also opens the door to predatory publishing practices.^{2,3}

Although most traditional journals that adopted open access have maintained their high standards of peer review and adherence to ethical codes of practice, thousands of fraudulent journals have arisen with the explicit goal of enticing unsuspecting authors to pay to get their articles published. Unfortunately, these journals have also tapped into a key driver of academic success — publish or perish. Where authors are driven by incentives to publish many articles, and especially where speed of publishing can be very important and authors are unaware of the predatory practices, they may see these journals as a convenient option, and, ironically, cost effective, as they usually have lower article processing charges than reputable journals.¹

Authors are typically lured with the use of phishing emails (that many *MJA* readers have undoubtedly found in their inboxes), which frequently refer them to slick, often deceptive websites that may include fake impact factors and editorial boards. In the worst cases, these predatory journals provide little, if any, vetting and peer review, and have a low (or no) threshold for article acceptance.⁴ Rapid publication is promised once open-access charges have been paid. But this is a spectrum; other journals fail to be transparent about their policies and have standards that are too low, and while these journals are also considered deceptive, they are harder to detect. Even journals listed on PubMed may be predatory in a minority of cases; because of the open-access requirements of funders, a publicly funded study published in a predatory journal may end up being listed in PubMed⁵ regardless of the journal’s quality or standards.

Special issues of journals are another version of predatory publishing in which authors are encouraged to submit articles for issues that have no or little editorial curation, by editors who have only a tenuous relation with that journal. The recent plan to retract about 1200 more articles (than the original 511) by Hindawi and its parent company, Wiley, was related to “Special Issues in these journals” being “targeted by papermills and bad actors, with researcher identities manipulated (to appear as legitimate researchers) and content fabricated (to appear as legitimate content).”⁶ Predatory journals therefore have a corrosive effect at many levels — for readers and authors, and for the wider research community.

Readers of the *MJA* and other reputable medical journals expect that articles have been carefully reviewed and vetted, and the information contained therein is accurate, reliable and safely applicable. Anyone turning to information in a predatory journal has no such reasonable assurance. In these deceptive journals, faulty, weak and inaccurate research is published, which may adversely affect clinical care and research. Furthermore, increasing numbers of citations to predatory journal research are cropping up in articles sent to reputable journals, showing that the contamination of poor or even fake research is spreading.^{7,8} In a further complication, good articles that are published in poor journals may never be seen, as many of these journals are not properly indexed in recognised reputable indices (eg, PubMed, Directory of Open Access Journals, Web of Science, Scopus) and may not be archived in perpetuity.

Authors may be affected in multiple ways. Crucially, they are likely to receive no feedback to improve their articles (which is part of a healthy peer-review process).⁴ The authors are also

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APAME 2024 Sydney Declaration on Predatory or Pseudo Journals and Publishers

Sydney declaration on predatory or pseudo journals and publishers

We, the participants in the Joint Meeting of the Asia Pacific Association of Medical Journal Editors (APAME), the Western Pacific Region Index Medicus (WPRIM), and Index Medicus of the South-East Asia Region (IMSEAR), held in Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia from August 28 to 30, 2024:

Considering

- That predatory (or pseudo) journals and publishers offer open-access publication in exchange for fees without robust editorial or publishing services; these include “fake” or “scam” journals or publishers who send phishing emails which promise quick review;
- That the articles collected by predatory (or pseudo) journals or publishers may never be published, or often are published with poor quality or accessibility, irrespective of any attempts by authors to withdraw them, resulting in such research effectively being lost;

Confirm

- Our commitment to uphold the quality and integrity of our individual journals and their respective submission, editing and review processes, in opposition to predatory (or pseudo) journal practices;
- Our commitment to exercise vigilance and safeguard the quality and integrity of our respective publishers against predatory (or pseudo) publication processes;
- Our commitment to ensure that member journals of the Asia Pacific Association of Medical Journal Editors (including those indexed in the Western Pacific Region Index Medicus and Index Medicus of the South-East Asia Region) and their publishers do not engage in predatory (or pseudo) journal or publication practices;

Call on

- Member States of and governments in the World Health Organization (WHO) Western Pacific and South-East Asia Regions, in collaboration with stakeholders from the non-governmental and private sectors, to formulate and implement procedures and processes for identifying and dealing with predatory (and pseudo) journals and publishers, and for guiding new and existing journals away from engaging in predatory (and pseudo) journal and publisher practices;
- Stakeholders from the public and private sectors, national and international organisations, universities and academic societies to support WPRIM, IMSEAR, the Global Index Medicus of WHO, in ensuring the availability of high quality health information for all that is not marred by predatory (and pseudo) journal and publication practices;

Commit

- Ourselves and our journals not to engage in predatory (or pseudo) journal practices, by learning about and implementing best journal practices, in accordance with the recommendations and guidelines issued by such bodies as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME);
- Our organisation, APAME, to building collaborative networks, convening meaningful conferences, and organising participative events to educate and empower editors, peer reviewers, authors, librarians, and publishers to recognise and avoid engaging in predatory (or pseudo) journal and publisher practices.

Source: August 30, 2024, Newcastle, NSW, Australia, Copyright APAME. This declaration was launched at the 2024 Convention of the Asia Pacific Association of Medical Journal Editors (APAME) held in New South Wales, Australia from 28 to 30 August 2024. It is concurrently published in journals linked to APAME and listed in the Index Medicus of the South-East Asia Region (IMSEAR) and the Western Pacific Region (WPRIM). ♦

fleeced of their funds, which is especially heartbreaking as many of the authors submitting to these journals are from low- and middle-income countries. And finally, if the authors list these articles on their curriculum vitae, they risk diminished future opportunities for education and employment.⁹

How to avoid being duped? The use of artificial intelligence programs to detect predatory journals has so far not proved very promising.¹⁰ Lists of predatory journals are available but may be incomplete, unreliable, and out of date.¹¹ Work has been done

to list the characteristics of predatory journals.^{1,4,9} In the end, the answer is likely to come from authors being very careful, and doing their own homework, especially if submitting to an unfamiliar journal. Helpful checklists are available.¹² Readers too must take care in assessing the research they read.

APAME issued this declaration because of the growing concern for the damage that predatory journals inflict.¹³ In conjunction with kindred organisations, APAME is committed not only to avoiding predatory journal practices, but to make every effort to educate and empower editors, peer reviewers, authors, librarians and ethical publishers to minimise their impact.

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Competing interests: Nicholas Talley is the President of APAME, Emeritus Editor-in-Chief of the *MJA*, a Section Editor for *UptoDate*, Associate Editor for *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, Chair of the Editorial Advisory Board of Gastroenterology, and is supported by research funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), Department of Defence and Industry. Nicholas Talley has received personal fees from Allakos (gastroduodenal eosinophilic disease; 2021), twoXAR Viscera Labs (irritable bowel syndrome–diarrhoea; USA, 2021), IsoThrive (esophageal microbiome; 2021), BluMaiden (microbiome advisory board; 2021), Rose Pharma (irritable bowel syndrome; 2021), Intrinsic Medicine (human milk oligosaccharide; 2022), Comvita Mānuka Honey (digestive health; 2021), Astra Zeneca (2022), Brown University (fibre and laxation systematic review; 2024–2025), outside the submitted work. In addition, Nicholas Talley has a patent Nepean Dyspepsia Index (NDI) 1998, a patent Licensing Questionnaires Talley Bowel Disease Questionnaire licensed to Mayo/Talley, “Diagnostic marker for functional gastrointestinal disorders” Australian Provisional Patent Application 2021901692, “Methods and compositions for treating age-related neurodegenerative disease associated with dysbiosis” US Application No. 63/537,725.

Virginia Barbour is the Editor-in-Chief of the *MJA*, which is part of the Wiley–CAUL deal, and which receives fees for open access publishing. She is co-Chair of DORA (Declaration on Research Assessment) and a member of the NHMRC’s Research Quality Steering Committee.

Jose Lapeña is a Past President of APAME, Secretary of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) and WAME board representative to the Directory of Open Access Journals, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Philippine Journal of Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery*.

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