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Hitting rock bottom: the descent from predatory journals and conferences to the predatory PhD.
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Do you have a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) or a PhD (Predatory Hoax Doctorate)? To even ask such a question is a mark of just how perilous the situation with predatory journals has become and the very real threat they pose to academic standards. The grave concerns regarding the metastatic erosion and ‘pollution’ (Watson, 2018) caused by the exponential growth (Perlin et al., 2018) of predatory publishers, their duplicitous practices, fake conferences and more (Grove, 2017) cannot be overstated (Darbyshire et al., 2016). Given what Nature has called, ‘The coronavirus publishing frenzy’ (Callaway, 2020), it is very likely that even more pop-up predatory journals will emerge to take money from all of those academics desperate to have their COVID-19 related papers published.

Some recent estimates suggest that as many as ‘25% of all journals being published are predatory’ (Cress, 2017) creating an industry worth $10.5 billion annually (Wilkinson et al., 2019). The situation is now so critical that all academics and students should assume a default position that any journal or conference is fraudulent and predatory unless and until they have done the due diligence required to ensure that they are legitimate. We live in a world of fake news, alternative facts, rampant conspiracy theories, deep fake image manipulation, twitter bot-driven truths and more (Darbyshire, 2018). Amidst this maelstrom of lies, half-truths, fantasies and undisclosed agendas we cling to the belief that science, research, facts, grounded interpretation, scholarship and ‘the literature’ will offer not incontrovertible or timeless truths that can never be questioned or shaken, but something that is credible and valid and upon which we can safely base our practice.

This is why we, as nurses undertake, read and value research. Good research gives us something substantial and tangible that we can base nursing theory and practice on, something more than; ‘I thought that’, ‘I really believe that’, ‘I wish that’ or ‘but we’ve always done that’. Research and scholarship are precious to us because they are not ‘all the same’ or some zero sum game; they are a continuum of thinking, knowledge and continued intellectual development. Not all research is of equal value or sig-
nificance. A new researcher’s first literature review on a stated topic can be useful but we don’t expect it to match the 10 year longitudinal study conducted by established researchers and their team of colleagues from 10 different countries. An undergraduate project dissertation could be wonderful, but we expect a lot more from a doctoral thesis. That is not a derisory judgement, it is exactly as the world of scholarship should be. One day, that undergraduate may well have earned their own PhD and have the skills and resources to be leading their own international research group.

Yet over the last two decades a perfect storm has emerged, comprising often transient, predatory publishers ready and willing to exploit academics for profit and an academic world driven by the ‘publish or perish’ imperative. For predatory publishers, academics and students represent potential customers, able to be lured by emails and journal websites that promise to meet their publication needs in days rather than months, and all with little or no possibility of rejection or revision as long as the fees are paid. It is a business model that can hardly fail. The predators have no need for offices, staff or systems, just a slick website with an immediate payment option and some appealing (usually stock) photos of their ‘dedicated staff’ or ‘Internationally Renowned Editorial Boards’, most often stolen from the internet, and they are ready to rake in their millions (Bohannon, 2015). This is not only duplicitous, unethical publishing that some nurses are involved in – that would be bad enough – it is cybercrime (Umlauf and Mochizuki, 2018).

That the research and scholarly literature is being so easily debased is not simply a matter of academic preciousness. This is not about a few old fogies sitting in a smoke-filled university staff club bemoaning the fact that in their day, standards were so much higher. This corruption is striking at the core of research integrity, and at the heart of everything that should be important about our universities, research institutes and scholarly literature. For example, who is going to be teaching and guiding the students of the future? Will it be academics with legitimate publications and sound personal, research and professional ethics, or will it be charlatans, whose CVs have been inflated by the inclusion of all of the publications that they bought through predatory publishers and their journals? We believe that this matters and matters deeply to both our academic community and to our patients. The scale of the problem can be illustrated in a recent example from a Pharmacology School in the USA where investigations found that in their applicants for an academic position:

Among 1,028 publications, 181 papers (17.6%) were published in journals that were either referenced on Beall’s list or whose publisher was included on Beall’s list. Additionally, of the 141 total editorial boards that were listed on applicant CVs, 91 (64.5%) were affiliated with publishers of predatory journals. Of the 40 applicants, nine were identified as having 50% or more of their publications in predatory journals and 3 had more than 80% of their publications in these journals. (Pond et al., 2019)(p.13)

Some may be blasé about such people joining the academic community and helping shape the next generation of students, but we are not, and nor should nursing, nor our universities.
A further (and alarming) affront to academic standards has been revealed to us recently. In this case, a PhD examiner returned a PhD thesis containing multiple publications, because all of the included publications were published in predatory journals. This simply beggars belief on so many levels. Had this examiner not been diligent and meticulous enough to spot this duplicity and act upon it, a new PhD would have been created who assuredly did not deserve the highest of academic awards. How often this is happening where examiners either do not notice, or turn a blind eye, does not even bear contemplation.

There is more than enough responsibility and culpability for such a situation to go around. It can be argued that students may be ‘naive’ and unaware of the academic fraud implicit in predatory publishing and conferences. Perhaps they ‘didn’t know’ how to spot predatory journals, conferences or editorial boards. Such excuses might hold water for first year undergraduate students, but emphatically not at doctoral level study. PhD students are not naive, unworldly learners or research students. If they are, then we have to seriously question why they are registered for a PhD at all. They are preparing for the terminal degree that is one of academia’s highest awards and cannot be allowed to trot out the defence that ‘we didn’t know’.

One of the saddest and most disturbing aspects of the predatory publishing business is that so many complicit academics and students must know exactly what they are doing. They are trying to build their track records and inflate their CVs in order to gain personal, professional and financial advantage. What they do not seem to consider are the implications for knowledge and health care. Peer review exists for a reason - to ensure the accuracy and scientific merit of new knowledge. When we bypass and subvert this step, misinformation, shoddy thinking and falsehoods are assumed to have credibility and scientific merit because they have been ‘published in an academic journal’. We have all seen how quickly disinformation about key health interventions such as vaccination can take hold and be believed, but even this pales into insignificance beside some of the grotesque nonsense published by predators. We refuse to cite these papers as this may only give citation credibility to their spurious journals, but do a Google search of ‘predatory spoofs or hoaxes’ to read some of the worst examples of what they will publish. Could any research student or faculty member have so little self-respect that they readily accept their work being published beside a paper written by a professor’s dog or a random word generating computer programme, in a journal that has ‘Dr Hoss Cartwright’ from the ‘Ponderosa Institute for Bovine Research’ on their ‘esteemed Editorial Board’?

Higher degree students are bombarded with every imaginable piece of information about their programme and degree award. It is beyond credulity that such information could not include explicit
warnings that publishing in predatory journals, presenting at their conferences or joining their ‘Editorial Boards’ is academic fraud and will be treated as such, in the same way as if you had faked your research data or plagiarised the work of others. Universities need to let it be known that students committing such fraud, will not progress and resulting ‘theses’ will certainly not be sent out for examination. Such a basic knowledge and awareness of predatory publishing, its pitfalls (Clark and Thompson, 2017) and its scamming tactics (Darbyshire et al., 2016) should be part of the essential research literacy of all university students and especially those undertaking higher research degrees.

As for the supervisors of any thesis full of predatory papers or references, words fail us. How could any academic supervisor read and discuss drafts of students’ work, discuss their publications strategy with them, or worse, agree to become a co-author on papers that are submitted to predatory journals and say or do nothing? This again, is not ‘naivety’, it is academic collusion and gross dereliction of academic responsibility. We would hope that a supervisor would never countenance plagiarism, data fraud or unethical conduct and would discuss the seriousness of this situation with the student. Why paying a predatory publisher to have your paper published is not viewed as similarly fraudulent and a breach of any accepted academic standards, or even as cybercrime (Umlauf and Mochizuki, 2018), defies understanding.

If individual students and their supervisors bear much responsibility here, this is minor compared to the gross culpability of Schools or Faculties, the broader university and the governance worlds, that seem almost perversely determined to do nothing at all to curb predatory publishing and the damage that it is wreaking. Despite twenty years or more of predatory publishing and global recognition of the academic and reputational damage caused, universities have neither confronted nor fought predatory publishing. Academia is morally, professionally and financially obliged to offer rigorous doctoral programmes with embedded oversight and clearly developed systems that uphold globally agreed academic standards. If it cannot do this, what purpose does it serve? As Mills and Inouye (2020) note, authors’ decisions regarding where to publish are, ‘situated within a system of incentives, pressures and expectations’ (Mills and Inouye, 2020:14).

Universities’ obsession with crude ‘number of publications’ as some kind of sound indicator of scholarship and potential for promotion or research funding (Grudniewicz et al., 2019) has created a perfect breeding ground for gullible or unscrupulous academics or students who see buying their publications as a legitimate way to puff up their CV and gain access to the numerous other benefits on offer to those with a ‘good track record’. As Pyne (2017) noted,

In terms of financial compensation, these publications produce greater rewards than many non-predatory journal publications. Publications in predatory journals are also positively correlated with receiving internal research awards. (Pyne, 2017)(p.137)
When considering the use of predatory publications in documents sent for examination for a PhD or other award, the role of the universities is clear. The university is ultimately responsible for the work it sends out for examination. It should never be left to internal or external examiners to identify predatory publications in theses and universities must ensure robust processes and clear information are in place to prevent this type of fraudulent activity.

Early career academics and higher degree students are especially easy prey for predatory journals as they seek to build their academic credentials in often pressurised and highly competitive environments. At the same time, the academy provides very few checks and balances regarding the journals, conferences, Editorial Boards or other academic processes that could either help or hinder career progression. In academia we have little open culture of discussing planned publications, conferences and other avenues of dissemination and professional sharing. Many (if not most) academics ‘publish in private’ and would never dream of discussing with colleagues, for example a best potential journal for their paper, or whether this would be a ‘good conference’ at which to present their work. This is an indefensible norm that perpetuates the sort of culture where predatory publishers and other academic frauds can take root and thrive. This situation is bad enough for experienced academics caught up in such cultures, but it is fraught with danger for research students and novice academic colleagues. No research student should ever submit a paper for publication, a potential conference presentation or any other dissemination of their work without detailed discussion with their supervisor(s).

**What is to be done?** The fight against predatory publishers is too great for individuals alone and needs universities and governments to agree to joint action. There is a need to further define and identify predatory journals (Beall, 2015b; Danevska et al., 2016; Grudniewicz et al., 2019) due to the nuanced growth of the industry and their targeting of low and middle income countries (Vervoort et al., 2020). Universities and all related government bodies could, for example, decree that no predatory publication, conference presentations or other academic involvement will be considered towards any grants, promotions, awards, funding or assessment exercises and that the inclusion of any such ‘work’ will result in disqualification of the applicant. At a stroke, such works and the appeal of predatory publishers could be rendered virtually worthless. Universities should also ensure that predatory publisher awareness and information is included in staff orientation programmes, doctoral training programmes, similar to embedded requirements for research integrity training.

Early career academics should not assume doctoral supervision roles in the absence of a series of reputable publications. A student, paying significant fees, should not be assigned to a sole supervisor who has few or no publications. Universities have a duty of care to support a student and in turn, to help an early career academic supervisor with collegial oversight. Experienced academics will be all too aware of the relentless predator spam that fills their email boxes (Beall, 2015a; Memon, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2019; Wood and Krasowski, 2020) and what is behind this. They must speak up at
every School and academic forum to call out predatory publisher practises and help prevent a generation of research students and novice academic colleagues being sucked into this vortex of fraudulent profiteering.

Many universities will rightly not permit a research grant application to be submitted without peer review so it is all the harder to understand why some would allow the submission of predatory papers and citations without such oversight? A discipline specific publications committee that could quickly scan potential papers to ensure the credibility of publications used, would protect individuals and also protect institutional reputation. The fact that the UK Research Exercise Framework does not explicitly ban the submission of outputs in predatory journals sends completely the wrong message and is a wasted opportunity in the battle against predatory publishers. Calls have been made repeatedly for governments and research assessment organisations to show leadership and specify both legitimate and predatory journals and to disallow work from the latter (see, eg, (Perlin et al., 2018)). Unless the fight against predatory publishers occurs at every level of academic integrity, by all stakeholders, from governments to individual students and academics, we had better be prepared to face a future where the ‘PhD by predatory publication’ could become an acceptable norm.

References


