

Predatory journals reach your desk

Las revistas depredadoras llegan a tu mesa

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A few days ago, a resident who was working with us as part of his rotation told me about a clinical case that he intended to publish and how he had managed to find a journal that had accepted it. Expressing my surprise, I advised him to check whether or not it was a predatory journal. After explaining this term to him, his subsequent search led him to discover a problem that is affecting us all and, although there is a great deal of information about it, many people are still unfamiliar with this concept.

It is true to say that predatory journals, according to the term coined in 2012 by Jeffrey Beall¹, are mushrooming and it is now difficult to distinguish between those journals that are ready to publish anything in order to charge a fee for their "publication expenses" and those that remain true to a strict review model by a series of reviewers and an Editorial Board that maintains high standards of quality, either to subsequently publish these articles in Open Access format (if the authors or institution of origin are prepared to bear this cost) or in paper format. The matter probably arises from the fact that journals with a high impact level only accept a small percentage of the articles received. This means that there are many authors who, after having invested time and work in preparing an article (the publication of which is sometimes key to maintaining or renewing a grant, for example) are desperately seeking somewhere to publish it. And of course, compared to a review process that is uncertain, demanding and generally lasts several months (and which may finally end in rejection), the option of publishing in an "international" journal that offers a review process of between 3 days (yes, this is no typo, this is what some publishers are offering) and 3 weeks, this starts to seem attractive. If we were to add to this the European Union's Plan S directive (that will come into force in 2020) and which aims to ensure that any research work financed with public funds can solely be published in Open Access journals, it may be that the founders

of the publishing companies responsible for issuing this proliferation of predatory journals have actually found the goose that lays the golden egg. It is interesting to note that the advocates of *Plan S* argue that science must be freely distributed and must not be restricted to the subscribers of the journals published by publishers that "obtain considerable profit from the dissemination of science". However, in my view, the ones to obtain considerable profit are those publishers that simply accept any work sent to them and limit themselves to converting it into publishable PDF, given that there are no expenses involved and there is nothing but profit.

The progressive change in the model for curricular advancement in Medicine, based on publications (either to get the accreditation of the ANECA (National Quality Assessment and Accreditation Agency of Spain) in order to obtain "sexenios" (salary supplements for each six year period based on research criteria), or to be eligible to apply for posts at the University or in the public healthcare system) has meant that not only are articles published in order to inform colleagues of progress or data that could enrich their ability to address or resolve problems experienced by patients, but also ways are sought to make the most of the investigation conducted. This has led to different types of fraud by authors: complete, plagiarism, or what is referred to as sliced or "salami" publications. It has also led to the appearance of a juicy market for pseudo-scientific journals that offer authors who are either novice, desperate, unsuspecting or unethical, the possibility of publishing their studies in "Open Access" format. Right now, the number of predatory journals is multiplying month by month. While most of these journals are based in India or China, almost all of them show a (false) postal address in the United States: a recent review found some of these locations in the middle of a motorway, in the town hall building, in a home on a housing estate, etc.².

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Over the last 2 weeks, 61 invitations have been sent to my main email account to entice me to send my “distinguished” or “relevant” investigation to one of these journals. The fact is that they are not very selective: there are journals in the area of sports medicine such as the *“International Journal of Sport Sciences and Medicine”* (by the publishers SciResLiterature, which indicates on its website that it publishes 50 different journals, all with titles that are vaguely similar to those of other prestigious journals), or the *“American Journal of Sport Sciences”* (by the publishers Science Publishing Group, which publishes 476 different journals and provides an address in New York when it is actually based in Pakistan); but there are also journals in the area of Neurology such as the *“Journal of Neurophysiology and Neurological Disorders”* (by the publishers JScience, offering me indexing in Pubmed if my article is funded by the NHI), or mesenchymal cell therapy (the *“Journal of Stem Cell Therapy and Transplantation”*, which also guarantees that I will be indexed in Google Scholar, Bing, Google, Yandex, Infotiger, Exalead, Baidu, ASR, etc.) or gastroenterology, and so on. Ah, and I was forgetting! Also,

during this time, at least 3 Open Access journals have asked me to act as a reviewer - free of charge, of course - of their articles, sending them my “experienced” or “extremely valuable” opinion in less than 3 weeks.

We are definitely living in times of change. There is always the possibility that, in the future, even the world’s most prestigious journals will be forced to change their publication policy or that some may even be left as atavistic reminders of a world in which people used to read in print, holding out against this wave of foolishness and mediocrity that is inundating us. Meanwhile, and as always recommended to all officers in the “Hill Street Blues” series, before starting their round, please, take care out there!

Bibliography

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