

Nurse Author & Editor

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PubPeer

PubPeer: Never Heard of It? You Have Now.

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[PubPeer](#) is nothing, if not controversial. Until the Editor of *Nurse Author & Editor* asked me to take a look at it and comment, I had never heard of it. Described in terms of its threat in his editorial “[Vigilante Science](#)” Michael Blatt, Editor of *Plant Physiology*, described it as ‘the most serious’ and described it as a ‘brand of vigilante science’. Strong words when juxtaposed with PubPeer’s own description on its “[About](#)” page as: seeking “to create an online community that uses the publication of scientific results as an opening for fruitful discussion among scientists.” This notion of PubPeer as “vigilante”

has been emphasised recently by a [posting on Retraction Watch](#) by its founders where they posted a retraction to their own advice about dealing with suspected unethical practice by authors. Instead of alerting editors and asking them to manage the issue—which would be in line with the Committee on Publication Ethics ([COPE](#)) guidelines—they say that those who suspect unethical practice should contact the author’s institution directly and they also advise the use of PubPeer. So, what is PubPeer?

PubPeer is a facility for online post-publication comment on scientific articles. The landing page for PubPeer introduces the venture as “The online journal club” with a large search box where articles may be found using a range of parameters such as the digital object identifier (DOI), the PubMed ID and keywords or author names. A browser extension is also offered, for download, which allows you to see PubPeer comments on PubMed and the journal website. Below the search box is a range of links including “About,” the PubPeer blog and a list of journals. Naturally, I searched my own journal—*Journal of Advanced Nursing*—which is listed and under which there appears three entries. The facility to find a journal is quite clumsy as journals cannot be found by name using the search facility on the landing page and can only be found by scanning a list of several hundred journals. However, for a casual encounter such as mine, the list is quite useful as the number of entries related to any journal is given in brackets. It appears that the list is only populated by journals which have PubPeer comments and, thus, can be expected to grow. A quick scan of the list suggests that the majority of journals have only a single entry but some have impressive entries into double figures. Presumably some of these superficial statistics are related to the number of articles published by a journal and, as is clear by clicking on a

journal and being taken to the entries, some of these are multiple comments on the same article. The way PubPeer works is that article authors are automatically informed if a comment about one of their articles appears on the website and PubPeer attempts to get the first and last authors to reply. It was very hard to tell from my cursory inspection of comments just how often authors took the opportunity to reply. It was clear, however that most of the comments were negatively critical of published articles and the anonymity of the comments compounded the issue of identifying the commenters.

Otherwise, the blog seems to be entirely populated by PubPeer and, thereby, is mainly an apologetic for the existence and *modus operandi* of the site. Contained therein is a history of PubPeer, open letters to editors and a justification of the anonymous nature of the operation. If you click on their “Press” link on the landing page you are taken to the logos of a wide range of newspapers, magazines and scientific journals where comments on PubPeer have appeared. It is clear by clicking on some of these that they have come under legal pressure to list the anonymity of specific commenters.

PubPeer has existed for little over two years and it is beginning to gather momentum in terms of the number of entries on its pages. However, these are early days and the influence of its efforts are hard to gauge. Being unaware of the site I have obviously never had anyone bring a PubPeer comment on any article to my attention. My guess is that this will change; the facility—and the temptation—to make anonymous comments on published articles will be too much to resist for many. Moreover, along with other sites such as [Retraction Watch](#)—high on sensitivity but low on specificity—we can expect to see a great deal more ‘naming and shaming’ over poor science and unethical publishing practices. I am an avid follower of Retraction Watch and

will undoubtedly visit PubPeer regularly, but these ventures still make me uncomfortable: they are unofficial and unelected and represent nobody. The influence of Retraction Watch, which has ended careers, is undoubted; but not until I draw what I think is an excellent article to someone's attention and they reply: "But have you seen the comments in PubPeer?" will I know that it has made its mark and is here to stay.

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