

Nurse Author & Editor

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Caught in the Trap

Caught in the Trap: The Allure of Deceptive Publishers

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In August 2014, International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE) launched an initiative designed to inform the nursing community about the emergence of online open-access journals published by individuals or companies who scam academic writers, hoping they will fork over money, or lend their good names, to support “journals” that exist only to make a profit at the expense of unsuspecting authors. INANE published a position paper in Nurse Author & Editor (INANE Predatory Publishing Collaborative, 2014) that explained the deceptive practices used by these publishers and emphasized the characteristics of sound editorial and publishing practices that authors can use to assess any journal that they might

consider for publication. As authors, we also explained this situation at length in our recently published book, *Writing in the Digital Age: Savvy Publishing for Healthcare Professionals* (Nicoll & Chinn, 2015).

Nevertheless, we all-too-frequently encounter situations in which nurse scholars have been drawn into the trap of publishing in dishonest journals or being listed as associated with such a journal as an “advisor” or “editor.” Even though this problem is worse in the physical sciences than in the humanities, the problem in nursing is alarming enough and continues to be a problem because many in our community are still either uninformed, or have not considered the real-world consequences for themselves and for the discipline.

We both have a strong record of supporting innovation and progress that challenges the status quo, but here we remain firmly situated in the position that there is ample reason to be concerned, even alarmed, in the face of deceptive and predatory practices. This is not only because of the ease with which these practices can be sustained in the digital environment, but also the very real threat that can result in terms of life, health, and safety, if journals publish works that in fact are not sound science, or even worse, misleading and deceptive reports that directly affect practice and patient outcomes (Beall, 2015a). Even if you are not engaging in deceptive practices yourself, as an author or an advisor or editor for a dishonest publisher, your association with one of their journals constitutes endorsement of the journal.

Our writings on this topic to date have focused on informing authors about the deceptive practices involved and how to choose wisely when seeking a journal for publishing your work. But now we have growing anecdotal evidence that despite efforts to inform people about the dangers involved, and despite the fact that most nurses would never expect to be the victims of scams and predatory practices, the reality is that many are being “caught in the trap,” only to discover their plight after it is too late.

With this in mind, we have developed a “Caught in the Trap” taxonomy to illustrate the kinds of vulnerabilities related to deceptive publishing practices. In the sections that follow, we explain each of these vulnerabilities based on real situations that we have encountered, and discuss why you are well-advised not to fall into the trap.

THE PENDULUM PHENOMENON

This is the most common “Caught in the Trap” situation that we have encountered, which existed pre-predatory journals, but is becoming more widespread. In a nutshell, after receiving a rejection from one, two, or even three non-predatory journals, the author swings to the other extreme and submits to a low-quality journal, where the article is ultimately published. With the emergence of predatory journals, the standard of “low-quality” is even further diminished.

Consider this scenario. The author has submitted a manuscript to a credible journal (or following an initial rejection, a second one) and received: 1) outright rejection; or 2) rejection with recommendations for revision, usually quite extensive. While the suggestions for revision might actually be “doable,” all the author often sees is the word **REJECT**. After a second or third rejection, that word looks even bigger and bolder.

Believing that it is not worth the effort to revise (or not having the option to revise, if the manuscript has been rejected outright), the author then receives a flattering email from a journal that appears to offer an option for publication. Instead of following the path of making needed revisions and seeking a journal that is well suited for the publication, the author swings in the direction of the easy opportunity. Typically the author has never heard of the journal that sent the email, and is not aware of, or bypasses the “journal due diligence” steps that every author should perform before submitting to any journal (Nicoll & Chinn, 2015). Only after the manuscript is published does the author discover the facts. In

one case that we know of, the author was alerted to the situation when she received the acceptance notice by email, along with an invoice for the \$3000 USD article processing charge (APC). She responded that she was not going to pay the APC and said she wanted to withdraw the article. The publisher replied that they had, in fact, already published her article, and would not withdraw it unless she paid the APC! In other words, her article was being held “hostage” until she paid “the ransom.”

In another case, the author discovered that the journal in which her article was published was a predatory publisher when she sent an announcement about the publication to us. We recognized the publisher’s name, and took the opportunity to ask her about her experience with the publishing process. Once again, a familiar story emerged. She had submitted to two journals which were, in our view, very top tier and not entirely appropriate for her manuscript. One journal quickly rejected the manuscript; the second offered a re-review pending extensive revisions. The author received the flattering email from the predatory journal just after the second rejection, and feeling discouraged, decided to pursue this opportunity. She was not concerned about the APC because her university research office had a fund to cover APCs in open access journals. We suspect that the University research office in major universities has a process for vetting open access journals before they pay the invoice for an APC, but in this case, when the publisher sent her notice that the APC was only \$200 USD, her Department Chair volunteered to pay the fee for her, no questions asked. We should note that the \$200 USD APC is much reduced from the typical APC charged by this journal, and that one of the deceptive practices used by these journals is to lure articles that are actually sound, well written, and scholarly in order to give the illusion that their journal is credible. Think of this as “inserting some flowers among the weeds.” The problem with these “flowers” is that someone doing a quick scan of the journal may see the professional appearance of the article and assume that the journal is meeting its obligations of peer review, proofreading, and copyediting, when in fact these tasks have done by the

author through the multiple cycles of peer review and revision in prior submissions.

In our experience, “pendulum authors” make two mistakes in their quest for publication. First, they aim high—really high—with their initial submission. We have known people who have opted for *Nursing Research*, *Research in Nursing and Health*, or venturing even further afield, *The New England Journal of Medicine* or *The American Journal of Public Health*. All of these journals receive enormous numbers of manuscripts so their initial review and rejection step is fast and abrupt. This abruptness seems to be the impetus for the pendulum to swing 180 degrees in the other direction, allowing the author to fall prey to the flattering email from the predatory journal—the second mistake. If a bit more due diligence had been applied at the outset, this consequence of actions might have been prevented.

THE “NOT UP TO PAR” PHENOMENON—OR EVERYTHING CAN BE PUBLISHED SOMEWHERE

If the “Pendulum Phenomenon” is a 180 degree swing, then we consider “Not Up to Par” to be a 90 degree turn. In this case, the author selects an appropriate journal but the content, as presented, does not meet the standard of the journal. For example, consider a study that, while very well-intentioned, has several methodological flaws (ie, small sample, data collection issues), which may or may not have been the fault of the researcher. Either way, the problems will be noted by the reviewers who will not review the manuscript favorably. It is a fact that editors and reviewers want research reports to meet a gold standard, not a minimum threshold.

What to do? As many authors have said to us, “I can’t lie about the study that has been done.” This is true. We often recommend that the author reconceptualize the paper—instead of writing it as a traditional research report, write it in a more narrative form (for example, a State of the Science report, or a Case Study) and use the research findings to inform the

discussion.

While this sounds good, we know this is a big task both conceptually and in the actual writing. As a result, we've known many authors who have opted to take a "shortcut,"—instead of doing the necessary hard work to rewrite the paper, they move down the ladder with their flawed paper to low, then lower, then lowest quality journals, landing at the end of the line in a journal published by a predatory publisher. The problem is, the paper that is published has the flaws that were initially noted in the original peer reviews. Maybe these concerns were addressed in a revision, but maybe not. Does the (predatory) journal have the controls in place to identify these issues? In our experience, the answer is no. We both know of manuscripts that were rejected from journals because of scientific flaws but that were subsequently published in predatory journals with no changes and apparently no editorial or peer review.

The problem here should be obvious. Publishing studies with flawed findings does not contribute to nursing science and, depending on the topic, may be harmful to patient care and outcomes. There are cases where authors have knowingly published "junk science" (Beall, 2015b) to pursue an activist agenda. We suspect that most nurse authors are not motivated in this way and are only trying to meet personal or employer publication goals. Even so, publication of flawed science has the real potential to damage the scientific ecosystem which we consider an issue of true concern.

THE "IT WON'T MATTER—I'M JUST ONE PERSON" PHENOMENON

We have encountered this phenomenon primarily by seeing the name of someone who is well-known as an author in nursing journals listed as a member of the "editorial board," or an "associate editor," or even "honorary editor" on the website of a recognized predatory

publisher. Predatory publishers are known to harvest names of well-known scholars from the web, and publish these names as involved with their journal without even informing the person. But established scholars also knowingly fall into the trap of being associated with a dishonest journal; we know of one case where a well-known nursing scholar served as a guest editor of a special issue for a widely recognized predatory publisher and encouraged colleagues to submit manuscripts for the issue.

More commonly, established scholars get involved with the journal because they believe that the people involved have good intentions, they fail to do their due diligence to investigate what is known about the journal and the publisher, and only later discover their dishonest practices first-hand. A recent article in the Al-Fanar Media Newsletter (Plackett, 2015) tells a typical story of a well-respected scholar and Faculty of Science Dean who agreed to be the editor of a new online journal in his field. He set up a legitimate review process and started implementing it when the first manuscript came in, only to be pressured by the publisher to forego his review process and make a decision quickly. After just a few months, the Dean ended his relationship with the publisher. However his name and contact information remain on the journal website; when he is contacted about his editorship, he urges people not to get involved with the journal (Plackett, 2015).

When we find such a case, our approach has been to ask the person if they know their name is listed on such-or-such a journal website, but all too often the response is a metaphorical “so what” shrug of the shoulder. In one case, the person responded that yes, she did know about it, and she had agreed because she supports the effort to broaden the content of journals to a more international perspective, which this journal claims to do. She further explained that she had not been asked to do much of anything, except review a manuscript every now and then, with a response within 2 or 3 days, which she was willing to do. She did note that it seemed that “English was not the native language” of the Editor, but that this did not bother her since she understood that this is an “international” journal. This is

fair enough, except that inadequate English is not acceptable in published English-language journals, and an email from someone communicating from such a journal with poor English should at least be a red flag to look further into the credibility of the journal.

Our response to the “It won’t matter” argument is that you, as a nursing scholar, are accountable and responsible for protecting not only the integrity of the literature of the discipline, but also your own reputation and scholarly integrity. If you succumb to the trap of letting your name be associated with journals and publishers that engage in deceptive practices, you are compromising your own good name, especially if you have done so knowingly.

CONSEQUENCES

If you are still skeptical about how serious these issues are, consider the following consequences:

- Most predatory publishers do not provide for indexing of the content of their journals; they may claim to do so, but, if you look into the actual indexing evidence, it is non-existent. This means people cannot find articles published in the journal using typical searches of the literature. Of course this is not a bad thing for work that could not meet the standards of reputable journals, but articles that could contribute to the discipline are essentially non-existent.
- There are no provisions for long-term archiving of the content of the journal, meaning that it could completely disappear from the Internet and be unavailable for any reader, even as soon as several months after publication. Again, this is fortunate for sub-par journal content but a serious harm for content that actually does have significance for the discipline.
- Promotion and tenure committee members, particularly in research-intensive settings, are now vetting any unfamiliar or questionable journals that appear on a candidate’s dossier;

any journal that is identified as not meeting acceptable editorial standards is discounted for tenure and promotion. This applies to articles that you have authored, and for any “service” items you list as a reviewer, advisory board member or editorial role associated with a journal that fails the vetting process.

- Once an article is published, even if you as the author own the copyright, there is nothing you can do to “liberate” the article from the journal. You can post the PDF file on social media to try to give the work visibility, but this will not serve the purpose of a permanent archive. And, the PDF accomplishes one of the goals of a deceptive publisher, in that it gives the journal the illusion of credibility.

In our view, the consequences are not only serious for individual authors, but they also have serious implications for the discipline.

CONCLUSION

Predatory publishing is a multi-million dollar business which has grown exponentially in recent years and shows no signs of slowing down (Shen & Björk, 2015). We believe that predatory publishers are damaging the reputation of legitimate open access publishers who provide quality journals following industry-accepted standards for editorial oversight and peer review. While we have some evidence of scholars and authors who knowingly choose to associate with predatory journals—and we believe this is a problem—the more common scenario we have encountered is authors who have unwittingly fallen into the trap of a journal that uses deceptive publishing practices. We encourage all authors to educate themselves on the issues, follow emerging trends in open access and predatory publishing, consult with colleagues, and make wise decisions when selecting journals for publication.

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