

# Current perspectives on predatory or low-quality journals

Durga Prasanna Misra<sup>1</sup>, Vinod Ravindran<sup>2</sup>

**Keywords:** ethics, research, publications, open access, publication model, predatory journals

**Financial and Competing Interests:** DPM is Associate Editor of the *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (JRCPE)*, and serves as editor/editorial board member/reviewer for several other international journals. VR is the Editor-in-Chief of the *JRCPE*, and serves as editor/editorial board member/reviewer for several other international journals. This paper has undergone peer review in accordance with *JRCPE*'s policies.

**Correspondence to:**

Vinod Ravindran  
Consultant Rheumatologist  
Centre for Rheumatology  
Calicut  
Kerala  
India

**Email:**

drvinod12@gmail.com

Scholarly publishing has undergone a sea change mirroring the rapid economic development across the world over the past two decades. Scientific publishing has become partially transformed as an industry with potential profits to be made. Scientific publishing is a unique endeavour, as it involves writing, reviewing and editing manuscripts by experts, which are both labour and time-intensive processes. Therefore, such attempted commercialisation of scientific publishing has resulted in the inevitable compromise on these standards, with the emergence of many low-quality or 'predatory' journals.<sup>1</sup> While there has been debate regarding which term is most appropriate to describe such journals, we have used the term 'predatory' in line with a recent consensus from an international group of authors.<sup>2</sup> A large number (but not all) of such predatory journals are open access; however, the open access model does not always mean unethical and in fact is an accepted model of publication in scientific publishing.<sup>3</sup> In this editorial, therefore, we have not grouped 'predatory' and 'open access' terms together. We discuss the attempts to reach a definition of predatory journals, recent guidance from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)<sup>4</sup> regarding predatory journals and contemporary debates on peer review and predatory journals.

The ICMJE regularly issues guidance on best practices in scholarly publishing. In the recent past, ICMJE have cautioned about predatory or 'pseudo' journals. The latest update of these recommendations in December 2019 also advises against citing articles published in predatory or 'pseudo' journals.<sup>4</sup> An analysis of published review articles in nursing journals detected an average of four citations to predatory journals in these articles.<sup>5</sup> While this might be deemed reasonable, such a conclusion might be criticised based on the lack of a consensus definition of predatory journals, as well as the potential encroachment on authors' freedom.<sup>6</sup> As publications in such predatory journals do not undergo

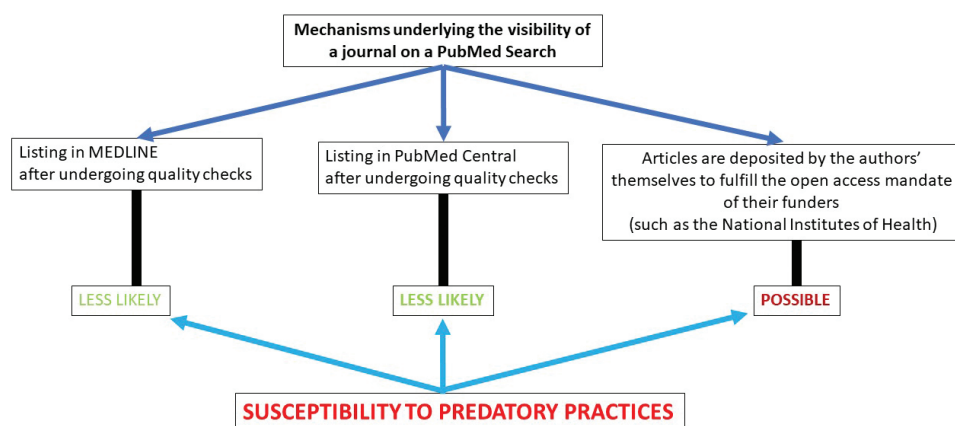
the appropriate rigour of peer review and mandated editorial oversight, the need to arrive at a standard definition of what constitutes predatory journals was emphasised.

Cukier and colleagues, in a recent systematic review, identified more than 90 proposed definitions of predatory journals in the published domain.<sup>7</sup> The vast majority of such definitions were not based on sound evidence derived from a literature search. Moreover, such definitions were not validated, a limitation which was likely due to the fact that there still exists no gold standard to define predatory journals.<sup>7</sup> It appears that the lack of a standard definition of predatory journals has contributed to their exponential growth in the recent times.<sup>8</sup>

Later, Cukier and colleagues undertook an online Delphi exercise with the objective of arriving at a consensus regarding the definition of predatory journals amongst a group of experts who had previously published on this subject.<sup>9</sup> They arrived at the following four important consensus criteria. Firstly, predatory journals provide misleading information on their websites regarding their site of origin, their editorial address or their publishers, they use unvalidated citation indices or falsely claim affiliation with editorial societies and indexing agencies. Secondly, such journals do not adhere to the current best standards in scholarly publishing. Examples of this include the requirement of a copyright transfer even for articles that are published as open access, lack of policies for retraction of articles or investigation of other scholarly misconducts. Thirdly, such journals lack transparency, whether in the requirement for publication charges (often intimated to the authors only after the article has been accepted), peer review processes or editorial policies. This lack of transparency extends to unverifiable editorial board members or editorial addresses. Fourthly, such journals often indulge in aggressive solicitation of articles from authors, many of whom might not even be related to the speciality of

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Clinical Immunology, Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences, Lucknow, India;

<sup>2</sup>Consultant Rheumatologist, Centre for Rheumatology, Calicut, Kerala, India



**Figure 1:** How predatory journals might be visible on a PubMed search

the journal. Cukier et al. state that the aforementioned criteria will require validation in the future and potentially evolve with time and with better understanding of the definition of predatory scholarly practices.<sup>8,9</sup>

Not unsurprisingly perhaps, no consensus could be arrived at regarding peer review in the proposed criteria.<sup>9</sup> While it is widely recognised that predatory journals lack appropriate peer review practices, this aspect could not be included because of the difficulties for an external observer of verifying peer review practices.<sup>2</sup> Despite the arrival of platforms such as Publons to register and verify peer reviews,<sup>10</sup> it has been noted that journals on proprietary lists of potential predatory journals such as the Cabell’s list, often have peer reviews listed on Publons.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, this point needs to be more clearly defined before it can be included in the definition of predatory journals.

Another important issue is considering a journal’s availability on PubMed as the sole indicator of its veracity. Journals indexed in either Medline or those whose articles are deposited in the PubMed Central (PMC) open access repository are searchable on PubMed. Deposition in PMC may be due to quality assessment of journals by PMC per se, or due to mandates of certain funding agencies such as the

National Institutes of Health (NIH). In the latter case, the NIH mandates that all work published by NIH-funded researchers must have an accepted version deposited on the PMC website by the authors, irrespective of whether such a journal is listed on PMC or not.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, if such authors have published an article in a predatory journal, such articles listing the said predatory journal are available on a PubMed search, despite not being a part of PMC or Medline. For the lay readers it may be difficult to identify them. A red flag for such journals is that they may have only a few articles listed. Further, by checking the journal name on the National Library of Medicine (NLM) catalogue, such journals are clearly earmarked as not listed on Medline, with the term ‘Selected citations only’ appended against their indexing status. The editorial addresses of such journals might mismatch their names, providing a further red flag about their veracity (Figure 1).

To salvage the prestige of scholarly publishing, it is necessary for authors, reviewers and editors to be aware of the menace of predatory journals. An attempt to validate and improve the recent definitions of predatory journals is the first step in this arduous journey. It is necessary to improve peer review practices overall, as well as investigate in-depth any journal’s claims about indexing rather than accepting the information provided at face value alone.<sup>12</sup>

## References

- Misra DP, Ravindran V, Wakhlu A et al. Publishing in black and white: the relevance of listing of scientific journals. *Rheumatol Int* 2017; 37: 1773–8.
- Dobusch L, Heimstädt M, Mayer K et al. Defining predatory journals: no peer review, no point. *Nature* 2020; 580: 29.
- Misra DP, Ravindran V. Publication models in scientific publishing: to open or not? *J R Coll Physicians Edinb* 2020; 50: 112–3.
- International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly work in Medical Journals. Updated December 2019. <http://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf>. (accessed 9/1/20).
- Collom CD, Oermann MH, Sabol VK et al. An Assessment of Predatory Publication Use in Reviews. *Clin Nurse Spec* 2020; 34: 152–6.
- Teixeira da Silva JA. The ICMJE recommendations: challenges in fortifying publishing integrity. *Ir J Med Sci* 2020. doi: 10.1007/s11845-020-02227-1. [Epub ahead of print 15/4/20]
- Cukier S, Helal L, Rice DB et al. Checklists to detect potential predatory biomedical journals: a systematic review. *BMC Med* 2020; 18: 104.
- Grudniewicz A, Moher D, Cobey KD, et al. Predatory journals: no definition, no defence. *Nature* 2019; 576: 210–12.
- Cukier S, Lalu M, Bryson GL et al. Defining predatory journals and responding to the threat they pose: a modified Delphi consensus process. *BMJ Open* 2020; 10: e035561.
- Misra DP, Ravindran V. Peer review in academic publishing; threats and challenges. *J R Coll Physicians Edinb* 2019; 49: 99–100.
- Van Noorden R. Hundreds of scientists have peer-reviewed for predatory journals. *Nature* doi: 10.1038/d41586-020-00709-x [Epub ahead of print 11/3/20].
- Misra DP, Agarwal V. Integrity of clinical research conduct, reporting, publishing, and post-publication promotion in rheumatology. *Clin Rheumatol* 2020; 39: 1049–60.