Mentoring helps authors say “no” to predatory journals

The scientific community is increasingly concerned about the proliferation of predatory journals. While collaborations among stakeholders are taking hold, senior researchers can serve as role models and mentors, sharing their wisdom and experience in navigating a changing landscape with many new journals. This white paper presents strategies to help raise awareness at all levels, from early-career researchers (ECRs) to established professionals, about the potential harms of publishing in predatory journals and the benefits of publishing in reputable journals. A checklist to help identify a predatory journal is included for distribution.
Raising awareness

Major scientific publishers, universities, government bodies, nonprofits and researchers in a wide range of disciplines are aware of the challenges posed by “predatory” journals, also referred to in the literature as “questionable” journals, “pseudo” journals and “fake” journals. Collaborations among these stakeholders to raise awareness about such journals are beginning to take hold. However, it’s equally important for senior researchers to mentor less-experienced researchers and educate them about the perils of predatory journals, defined by Shamseer et al as those that “actively solicit manuscripts and charge publication fees without providing robust peer review and editorial services.”

As noted in a recent article about an American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) open forum, “research faculty are the key to the future of science. They have the single most important influence on a trainee’s personal and professional development.”

Mentors can help thwart the impact of predatory journals on their mentees and collaborators—and also may have something to learn themselves, as well. Sarah Eaton, PhD, of the Weklund School of Education at the University of Calgary, authored a comprehensive resource guide aimed at educating “students, researchers and anyone else interested in learning more” about predatory journals and questionable conferences. She notes that the guide “may be helpful to those who are further along in their careers, too.”

As an example, she writes that a faculty member who reviewed a tenure application for a junior professor told her he was concerned that the professor might be publishing in predatory journals. The two investigated and determined that the cited journals were indeed “legitimate and credible”—but the reviewer was not familiar with them because they were not in his field of expertise. Further, Eaton points out, “there are so many new journals... popping up that it can be difficult, even for a seasoned academic, to know the difference.”

Separately, a co-editor of the International Journal of Women’s Dermatology described in detail how the advent of predatory publishing made it difficult for the Women’s Dermatologic Society’s to establish a new peer-reviewed journal. Aamir Raoof Memon of the Peoples University of Medical and Health Sciences for Women in Nawabshah, Pakistan, revealed his own experience with predatory publishing in a recent blog post on AuthorAID, a site that provides support and mentoring for researchers in low- and middle-income countries. His first paper was published in a journal he subsequently learned is “widely regarded as predatory.” The paper had been rejected by several reputable journals, but for the predatory journal, “it was accepted without any revisions within two weeks, after a pseudo-peer review.” Shortly after acceptance, Memon received an invoice for $1,219 to have it published.

“When my senior colleague told me that this journal appeared to be predatory, I was heartbroken and completely shaken, as this was my first piece of work and I had put a lot of energy into getting it published. Unfortunately, my teachers who had co-authored the paper with me did not know anything about journal selection and focused on international and impact-factor journals only, irrespective of their legitimacy.”

Memon has gone on to publish extensively about the perils of predatory journals—but in reputable journals.

Small wonder that a recent World Association of Medical Editors policy statement on identifying predatory or pseudo-journals affirms, “Those mentoring junior researchers must recognize that predatory journals exist and help those they mentor identify high quality publication venues” as part of “addressing the scourge of predatory journals.”

How mentors can help

Serials Librarian Ruth Bueter and Assistant Professor Tami Ritsema of George Washington University have created an educational video, “Predatory Publishing: What You Don’t Know Can Hurt You!,” in which they state, according to coverage of the webinar:

“From a mentorship perspective, this is a great opportunity when you start talking with someone about their projects, to help them think about and write toward their target journal. When we mentor, if we train them to enter into that discussion right away, as soon as the research design phase is completed, it is a long-term service to authors.”

With that in mind, it is important that mentors convey the following key messages to their mentees, both formal and informal:

1. **What you publish matters.** When someone is under pressure to publish, it’s easy to lose the forest— one’s whole career—for the trees (getting publications “out there”). Mentors can provide perspective. Predatory journals not only lack prestige; they lack the ability to educate authors through rigorous peer review. Senior researchers interviewed for this white paper consistently noted that this powerful aspect of peer review—educating authors and improving their work—is frequently overlooked. There is no benefit to publishing rapidly if the work is flawed. Nor is there benefit to rapid publication if the work is poorly presented and replete with errors. Reputable publishers include authors’ guides and provide editing services to help ensure that good work is properly presented to the larger scientific community.

2. **Where you publish matters.** Publishing in credible journals is critical for career advancement for authors at every level. Although it may take longer to have the work accepted and published, the wait generally is worth it. The oft-promoted idea of “aiming high” then “aiming lower” after a rejection can propel researchers to publish in predatory journals, especially in a “publish or perish” environment. As Eaton noted, mentors...
3. **Nurture, don't tarnish, your scientific reputation.** A researcher's name and reputation are critical for credibility and career advancement. A mentor can help authors understand that publishing in a predatory journal can cause possible harm to a researcher's body of work and employability, and can also result in monetary loss to both the author and the institution that funded the work (and possible harm to that institution's reputation, as well). Further, there is no assurance of longevity for a paper published in a predatory journal, and the journal itself could even become a target of investigative authorities, with the risk of being delisted (if it was listed at all to start with) by reputable citation systems such as SCOPUS.

In an editorial published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing Research*, Clark and Thompson elaborate on “Five (bad) reasons to publish your research in predatory journals.” These include: I do not care about my external reputation; I do not believe in myself or my work; Publication numbers count most; I cannot be bothered to read; I have given up.

4. **Collaborations are important.** Collaboration is essential to the success of many research endeavors, particularly when funding is scarce. Collaborators can provide resources as well as new views and perceptions on a research project. Mentors can help by instilling this message to their mentees, emphasizing that collaborations are likely to make it easier to publish in a reputable journal.

In fact, such collaborations are helpful at every stage of a researcher's career, and can propel authors at every level in the appropriate direction. An article exploring the importance of mentoring and collaboration to research notes that respected neuroscientist Nicolas Bazan, MD, PhD, has collaborated with many scientists throughout his career, and that such collaborations have led not only to significant discoveries and publications, but also to the establishment of a couple of biotech companies. Dr. Bazan is a strong advocate of mentoring, and authored the seminal grant, “Mentoring neuroscience in Louisiana,” which led to an expansion of neuroscience research in the state and, undoubtedly, numerous publications in reputable journals.

Appropriate international collaborations, encouraged by Elsevier and other reputable publishers, can also lead to increasing opportunities for publication in reputable journals, and should be fostered by mentors whenever possible.

5. **Think. Check. Submit.** This site provides a simple checklist researchers can use to evaluate the credentials of a journal or publisher. It also encourages critical thinking—assessment of the facts unclouded by pressure and emotions. Mentors should encourage the use of this tool (See p. 4 for the checklist). If researchers are still in doubt, they can check with their institution's librarian to see if the librarian has ever heard of the journal or publisher or can investigate further.

**The bottom line**

Regardless of whether you have chosen to be a formal or informal mentor, as a senior researcher, you are setting an example for ECRs, as well as for your colleagues and collaborators. As the AAAS suggests in its “Top 10 Tips for Mentors,” it is critical that, in this role, you “live your professional standards (and) serve as a role model for high standards of professionalism.” This includes doing and encouraging the best possible research and publishing in reputable journals—setting a high bar for yourself and everyone you come in contact with in the scientific community.
How to Identify a Predatory Journal: Use this list to check if it is trusted

Think Check Submit is a collaborative campaign to help researchers identify trusted journals for their research. It provides a simple checklist researchers can use to assess the credentials of a journal or publisher. This checklist and more information are available at: https://thinkchecksubmit.org.

Do you or your colleagues know the journal?
- Have you read any articles in the journal before?
- Is it easy to discover the latest papers in the journal?

Can you easily identify and contact the publisher?
- Is the publisher name clearly displayed on the journal website?
- Can you contact the publisher by telephone, email, and post?

Is the journal clear about the type of peer review it uses?

Are articles indexed in services that you use?

Is it clear what fees will be charged?
- Does the journal site explain what these fees are for and when they will be charged?

Do you recognise the editorial board?
- Have you heard of the editorial board members?
- Do the editorial board members mention the journal on their own websites?

Is the publisher a member of a recognized industry initiative?
- Do they belong to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)?
- If the journal is open access, is it listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)?
- If the journal is open access, does the publisher belong to the Open Access Scholarly Publishers’ Association (OASPA)?
- Is the journal hosted on one of INASP’s Journals Online platforms (for journals published in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Central America and Mongolia) or on African Journals Online (AJOL, for African journals)?

Is the publisher a member of another trade association?

Additional Resources


Shamseer et al. Potential predatory and legitimate biomedical journals: can you tell the difference? A cross-sectional comparison. Offers additional tips and strategies for determining which journals are reputable and which are likely not. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-017-0785-9

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Compilation of robust online resources that include information on finding and selecting the right journal for your work and ensuring visibility and social impact. https://researcheracademy.elsevier.com/publication-process/finding-right-journal

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