

The Washington Post

Morning Mix

# Major publisher retracts 43 scientific papers amid wider fake peer-review scandal

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By **Fred Barbash** March 27, 2015

A major publisher of scholarly medical and science articles has retracted 43 papers because of “fabricated” peer reviews amid signs of a broader fake peer review racket affecting many more publications.

The publisher is BioMed Central, based in the United Kingdom, which puts out 277 peer-reviewed journals. A partial list of the retracted articles suggests most of them were written by scholars at universities in China. But Jigisha Patel, associate editorial director for research integrity at BioMed Central, said it’s not “a China problem. We get a lot of robust research of China. We see this as a broader problem of how scientists are judged.”

Meanwhile, the Committee on Publication Ethics, a multidisciplinary group that includes more than 9,000 journal editors, issued a statement suggesting a much broader potential problem. The committee, it said, “has become aware of systematic, inappropriate attempts to manipulate the peer review processes of several journals across different publishers.” Those journals are now reviewing manuscripts to determine how many may need to be retracted, it said.

Peer review is the vetting process designed to guarantee the integrity of scholarly articles by having experts read them and approve or disapprove them for publication. With researchers increasingly desperate for recognition, citations and professional advancement, the whole peer-review system has come under scrutiny in recent years for a host of flaws and irregularities, ranging from lackadaisical reviewing to cronyism to outright fraud.

Last year, in one of the most publicized scandals, the [Journal of Vibration and Control](#), in the field of acoustics, retracted 60 articles at one time due to what it called a “peer review and citation ring” in which the reviews, mostly from scholars in Taiwan, were submitted by people using fake names.

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Ivan Oransky and Adam Marcus, the co-editors of [Retraction Watch](#), a blog that tracks research integrity and first reported the BioMed Central retractions, have [counted a total of 170 retractions](#) in the past few years across several journals because of fake peer reviews.

“The problem of fake peer reviewers is affecting the whole of academic journal publishing and we are among the ranks of publishers hit by this type of fraud,” Patel of BioMed’s ethics group [wrote in November](#). “The spectrum of ‘fakery’ has ranged from authors suggesting their friends who agree in advance to provide a positive review, to elaborate peer review circles where a group of authors agree to peer review each others’ manuscripts, to impersonating real people, and to generating completely fictitious characters. From what we have discovered amongst our journals, it appears to have reached a higher level of sophistication. The pattern we have found, where there is no apparent connection between the authors but similarities between the suggested reviewers, suggests that a third party could be behind this sophisticated fraud.”

In a [blog post](#) yesterday, Elizabeth Moylan, BioMed Central’s senior editor for research integrity, said an investigation begun last year revealed a scheme to “deceive” journal editors by suggesting “fabricated” reviewers for submitted articles. She wrote that some of the “manipulations” appeared to have been conducted by agencies that offer language-editing and submission assistance to non-English speaking authors.

“It is unclear,” she wrote, “whether the authors of the manuscripts involved were aware that the agencies were proposing fabricated reviewers on their behalf or whether authors proposed fabricated names directly themselves.”

Patel, in an interview, said the peer review reports submitted “were actually very convincing.” BioMed Central became suspicious because they spotted a pattern of unusual e-mail addresses among the reviewers that seemed “odd” for scientists working in an institution. Also odd was the fact that the same author was reviewing different topics, which did not make sense in highly specialized fields.

Ultimately, when they tracked down some of the scientists in whose names reviews were written, they found that they hadn’t written them at all. Someone else had, using the scientists’ names.

“There is an element of exploitation,” Patel said. “If authors are naive and want to get their manuscripts published, they can be exploited” by services into paying the fees. The services, she said, may be offering to “polish up manuscripts” and perhaps even guaranteeing publication.

“This is a problem not just for publishers to resolve,” she said. Journals, research institutions and scholars “need to get together. It is part of the broader pressure to publish that’s driving people to do this.”

In its [statement](#), the Committee on Publication Ethics said: “While there are a number of well-established reputable agencies offering manuscript-preparation services to authors, investigations at several journals suggests that some agencies are selling services, ranging from authorship of pre-written manuscripts to providing fabricated contact details for peer reviewers during the submission process and then supplying reviews from these fabricated addresses. Some of these peer reviewer accounts have the names of seemingly real researchers but with e-mail addresses that differ from those from their institutions or associated with their previous publications, others appear to be completely fictitious.”

The BioMed Central [articles in question](#) now carry retractions attached that say: “The Publisher and Editor regretfully retract this article because the peer-review process was inappropriately influenced and compromised. As a result, the scientific integrity of the article cannot be guaranteed. A systematic and detailed investigation suggests that a third party was involved in supplying fabricated details of potential peer reviewers for a large number of manuscripts submitted to different journals.”

The BioMed Central [list of retracted articles](#) so far identifies 38 of the 43 published papers. They all have highly technical names and topics, such as “Pathological dislocation of the hip due to coxotuberculosis in children” and “A meta-analysis of external fixator versus intramedullary nails for open tibial fracture fixation.”

[h/t Retraction Watch](#)

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