

Responsibilities of authors, institutes and journals on publication

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Medical practice is based on evidence. One goal of medical journals is to record evidence. Published papers permanently document findings from patients to promote clinical science and techniques. Authenticity and accuracy are essential.

Incorrect clinical evidence confounds medical practice and misleads future investigators. Manipulation or fabrication of data or statistics in scientific studies threatens the integrity of published work and hence patient care. *The Journal of Hand Surgery (European Volume)* announces the decision to retract seven published papers and the withdrawal of two submitted papers from the same team of authors. These papers contain a broad range of academic misconduct, ranging from the inability to trace at least some of the original data, manipulation of statistics, deceiving reviewers and editors, fabrication of approval from institutional review boards (IRBs) and irresponsible authorship.

This editorial discusses the proper roles and responsibilities of authors, institutes, and journals illustrated by this case.

Reviewers' critical role and the Journal's investigation

The detection of this extensive misconduct stemmed from peer review of a submission from Dr Young Hak Roh and co-authors (Drs Sangwoo Kim, Hyun Sik Gong and Goo Hyun Baek) in June 2019. The very attentive reviewers' consideration of the determination of sample sizes in the report led to a series of questions to the authors. At the same time, a senior editor found that the authors had carried out a prospective randomized trial along with a concurrent case-series study on the same surgical technique. In nine rounds of ensuing questions and answers centered on the two concerns between our editor, Michel Boeckstyns, and Dr Roh over a 1-month period, Dr Roh's answers were repeatedly and gravely self-contradictory.

For example, he stated that the sample sizes of the clinical trial that had started in 2014 was based on the results from the case series that ended in 2016 and was published in another journal in 2018. He also

claimed to have run a randomized controlled trial side-by-side with a study of an independent case series about an identical procedure. Later when asked about the source of the data, he reported that the medical records were discarded at the end of the study, which surprised and alarmed the editors. Our editors consider this to be an appalling practice. Discarding the original records of material in scientific papers is against rules universally held by the research community. These responses were forwarded to the editor-in-chief, Jin Bo Tang, and later to the entire editorial team. Another editor, Tim Hems, clearly recalled a submission from the same authors from whom he had requested raw data, but this request was never answered. These findings aroused our concerns about multiple papers from these authors.

After thorough discussion among the editorial team, we asked the co-authors to verify the data sources on a set of three papers. We considered that the co-authors should be able to confirm the authenticity of data, but unexpectedly they replied that they could not do so for any of these papers. Therefore a letter was sent on 15th August 2019 through the co-authors to the institutes where the papers originated, requesting them to verify the data. Days later the four authors of the three papers asked to withdraw these papers. They admitted various forms of misconduct including inability to trace some of the data sources and manipulation of statistics, and stated that the provision of incorrect answers over the past 1 month to the reviewers' and editors' questions was an undeniable fault.

The withdrawal letter shocked the editorial team because the answers given before this withdrawal letter were clearly intended to deceive the reviewers and editors. In addition, before the letter, the lead author had provided the editors with a spreadsheet file containing "raw data", but it came to light in their withdrawal letter that the authors were unable to trace at least some medical records for these data, and that statistics had been manipulated. The two senior authors, Dr Hyun Sik Gong and Dr Goo Hyun Baek, stated they had not been involved in the scientific studies; they had only reviewed the study

submissions. On questioning, the two senior authors, who had co-authored more than 50 papers with Dr Roh, stated that they knew nothing about the study designs and had not participated in data collection or analysis in any of the papers. We asked whether they could help verify the data sources in any papers, not just the papers in this Journal. They said they had no way to verify the data sources and could not guarantee the data accuracy for any of the papers they had co-authored.

In early October 2019 we decided to share the information with some other journals in which they had published: *The Journal of Hand Surgery (American Volume)*; *Arthroscopy*; and *Injury*.

Senior authors' responsibility and publication ethics

Each author bears responsibility for studies and articles submitted in their names. This is especially so for senior authors who may serve as mentors. These and all authors must not only adhere to established scientific practice as outlined in the Guidelines on Good Publication Practice, but all authors have to attest to the veracity and accuracy of the study and their contribution to the study at the time of submission. Every author is fully accountable for any study submitted in their names with their knowledge; all who take credit must take responsibility. The senior authors bear *the same or even heavier* responsibility for papers with their names attached. That is why being senior authors they risk their reputations and their future careers if severe problems occur.

Senior authors should note that reviewers and editors spend time and meticulous effort to ensure clarity of presentation, and the accuracy of the methodology and conclusions for each paper that is to be published. This is futile if co-authors, especially senior ones, have not checked the accuracy of data or the authors present studies based on manipulated data or statistics.

The editorial team was most concerned about the senior authors' claim that all they did was review the manuscripts. In PubMed, close to half of Dr Gong's publications and one-fourth of Dr Baek's publications have Dr Roh as the lead author. Readers probably would never have expected, and would find it hard to accept, that their role was merely to review these articles. The quality of all the authors' published work is tarnished. Although irresponsible authors and improper authorship are seen occasionally, the occurrence in so many papers is staggering. To the editors, the inference is that these authors have little credibility as scientists.

Lead author's responsibility and scientific conduct

It is essential that all authors write papers based on facts and that all the answers to editors' and reviewers' questions are truthful. Intentionally providing false statements and false data is scientific misconduct. Despite the editors' reminders about the serious consequences, Dr Roh *intentionally* misled the editors with faulty answers for over a month.

Authors have an obligation to respond to editorial requests. Dr Roh responded on one occasion, "It is time consuming that all authors check the large data..." This response astounded us and left us with the sense that he and his co-authors did not know what it means to be the authors of a scientific report. A common rule in the scientific community is that all data are kept for a reasonable time period and that they are available for audit should questions arise. Ensuring preservation of original records and preparing them for audits are responsibilities of the author/investigator. Rejecting audits or pleading inability to provide original documents for auditing can be taken as a lack of data support.

The declaration about study approval should be true. Falsification of this declaration is academic misconduct. One of Dr Roh's former institutes found that five of his clinical studies were never presented to the IRB as required, and serial numbers were fabricated. It also came to light later that many others were not presented to the relevant IRB and some are unlawful.

Institutional responsibility

How could Dr Roh and co-authors perform and submit dozens of unauthorized or unlawful studies and repeatedly escaping from oversight over many years? The facts indicate lack of efficient supervision in the institutes *at several levels*. The deceptions were also implausible to go on without co-authors being acquiescent. Multiple institutes are involved. The Journal had difficulty contacting them. In the initial months we encountered "silence" or unclear responses of several institutes. For example, we had a reply stating: "We agree with the findings of the editorial team", without addressing the details of serial questions. No clarification was offered despite us requesting it. It is unacceptable when investigating possible misconduct. Institutes should either give definite answers or provide reasons why the questions cannot be answered. The answers should be explicit and unambiguous. It is institutes' responsibility to act to improve oversight and to investigate and resolve serious concerns.

We commend the Research Integrity Committee of the Ewha Womans University, led by a vice president, for performing a superb investigation into suspect papers from December, 2019, and providing definitive conclusions at each work step. The committee provided the national law for us to comprehend what violations the authors had committed. The committee found there was intentional, repetitive, and serious misconduct during the research for these papers, and the authors' multiple studies designed as randomized or prospective observational studies were performed without approval and violate the law. They agree that authors' letter of withdrawal and reports of data sources for sample size determination indicate that there was data fabrication and statistical manipulation.

Journals' responsibility

Journals are not investigative bodies and editors naturally trust, rather than suspect, authors. If suspicion cannot be resolved through contacting authors, journals are compelled to contact the institute(s) where the authors work. Although the criteria for retraction of a publication will vary amongst journals, journals do have to retract papers occasionally. In this case there were several striking facts:

- Dr Roh has published in many journals.
- Serious IRB-approval issues have surfaced about many papers.
- Answers from Dr Roh to our questions were evasive, inconsistent, or illogical.
- Senior authors claimed to have not participated any study process except reviewing manuscripts, contrary to statements at the time of paper submission.
- The Journal had difficulty contacting institutes, as Dr Roh changed workplaces three times over 9 years.
- Dr Roh published often monthly or bimonthly in a variety of journals on large patient series or randomized trials. This magnitude of productivity is not commonly seen.
- The authors had similar submission patterns for about 60 papers with quite a few at the submission stage when we detected problems.
- The authors declared institutional approval for randomized clinical trials, but it turned out that

the institutes had not approved the studies and the patients were not consented. Multiple unlawful acts escaped institutional oversight. The institutional approval numbers were fabricated.

- The co-authors offered no data verification or clearance of ethical issues for any papers.
- Many of the reports raise serious concerns about or have problems with data sources, with statistical manipulation in at least some reports.

The gravity of this case was identified in our editorial conferences and discussed in the Committee of Management meetings. We believe that the authors' conduct has fallen below our Journal's threshold to keep these papers as permanent scientific documents. Their exclusion will maintain the Journal's reputation. Irresponsible authorship combined with serious breaches of research ethics, including performing multiple unauthorized clinical trials, a lack of required IRB approval (found in each of the papers, which alone would make them unacceptable), together with the evidence of deceiving the editors (weighed heavily in the retraction), lack of evidence and uncertainty of proper data sources, fraudulent data, and manipulation of statistics mean that these papers had to be retracted. We must point out that many of the offenses in isolation would have demanded retraction. The list reflects only the gravity of offenses. In addition the severity of these deceits mean that these authors have been banned from further publication in the Journal.

Time and resources have been wasted in dealing with this matter. This case illustrates the need for honesty by the lead author and the critical roles of all co-authors. If the co-authors had played their roles correctly, this serial misconduct might not have happened or been stopped.

The fate of the papers from the same team published in other journals is presently unknown, and will depend on where future investigations lead. This editorial highlights the responsibilities. It is clear that, as scientific workers, authors or editors, we must stand for high scientific and ethical standards to protect the quality of published work.

Jin Bo Tang
Editor-in-Chief

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