

Cutting the cake! publication ethics in science

EDITORIAL

Scientific publications in Dentistry are essential to continuously move the field forward. We simply need research to progress, and for the research to be useful, it should be disseminated through publications. Researchers also need to demonstrate their productivity to attract funding, maintain their reputations and perhaps get promotions. Research is not only an altruistic activity. Unfortunately, sometimes a few researchers may feel tempted to cut very thin slices of their research to present as many papers as possible. The salami-tactic is well-known and basically addresses the issue of what is the least-publishable unit? Obviously, some studies are so complex and have so many variables that more than one paper is merited in order to fully describe the finding and their implications. On the other hand, almost overlapping publications may appear if too thin slices are made. We are not talking about plain plagiarism or scientific fraud, for which we already have very good ethical guidelines, and where appropriate, actions such as retraction of papers can be made; we are talking about the grey-zone between double-publication and a thin cut.

As editors of *Dental Traumatology* and *Journal of Oral Rehabilitation* (JOR), it was brought to our attention from an anonymous source that a double-publication had appeared in JOR and *Dental Traumatology*. The duplicate check indeed indicated substantial overlaps with major parts of the abstract, introduction, materials and methods, results and discussion, including conclusions being virtually similar, although not completely identical.

The first publication in *Dental Traumatology* from 2004 had included 18 patients, whereas the subsequent publication in JOR from 2005 included 41 patients. The actual values in the results therefore also differed, although they were presented in very similar formats. Only one thing really separated the two papers; in the first study, the authors had established 3 diagnostic groups, whereas 5 groups were present in the subsequent study. The question here is therefore slightly

more complex than a double-publication, because the argument could be made that the JOR paper with the additional diagnostic groups could provide new and more information than the previous paper.

We asked for the author's feedback and expert opinions but quickly ended up in the grey-zone between a double-publication and a thin cut because of some of these subtle differences in the two papers. Nevertheless, we feel strongly that the conduct of the authors is unacceptable, because the last paper would have been sufficient to provide all new information to the readers. We have therefore warned the authors about the serious consequences and sanctioning of submissions to JOR and *Dental Traumatology*.

We will urge authors to carefully consider if they should wait to publish their results until the sample size is adequate and avoid attempts to publish interim analyses of subgroups. The likelihood that this will be discovered at some point in time is big! There are anonymous groups that will have personal or professional reasons to scan for overlaps in the published literature, or it will be found out simply by coincidence. Both our journals have plagiarism checking tools to scan for overlaps before submission, and we recommend the use of this facility. Although there may be no final formula to determine the exact degree of overlap between two publications, we suggest that authors use their common sense in addition to these tools to decide if the cut has been too thin, or whether it is indeed a well-justified publishable unit. This is about ethics in scientific publications, and it is about our need for better research – not only more! We are determined to maintain the highest standards in our journals and whenever necessary to take appropriate actions, including both retraction of double-publications and sanctioning of named authors.

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