

## Simultaneous submission and duplicate publication: Curse and a menace which needs to be checked

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Editors of peer reviewed medical journals from the developing, Third world countries are faced with numerous problems<sup>1</sup> In fact editing a good quality peer reviewed journal is an uphill task. Most of these medical journals are constantly faced with financial constraints to ensure regular publication. Among many other problems which they have to face, simultaneous submission of manuscripts by authors to more than one journal is perhaps the most disgusting and frustrating for the editors. The editors cannot act as policemen and they have to trust the authors when they give a written undertaking that this is an unpublished material and is being exclusively contributed to a particular journal. Even after having given this written undertaking, some authors indulge in intellectual dishonesty and submit the same paper to other journals as well. Little do they realize that how difficult and time consuming it is to go through the whole peer review process which ensures some quality before these manuscripts are accepted for publication. By simultaneous submissions, they waste the precious time and resources of the editors as well as reviewers. More recently there has been an interesting debate on the EMAME as well as WAME websites on this subject. The issue of simultaneous submissions was also discussed in detail at the Second Regional Conference on Medical Journals held at Riyadh Saudi Arabia under the auspices of WHO EMRO and EMAME.<sup>2</sup> The problem seems to be acute and time has come to formulate some guidelines to tackle this issue on permanent basis.

The authors do have some grievances against the Editors. There have been many instances

when the authors who submitted their manuscripts to some journals, did not get a feedback even after numerous reminders. The authors certainly want to see their name in print once they have written a manuscript after having conducted a study and at times their intellectual dishonesty of simultaneous submissions is the result of pressure pending their selection or academic promotions. On the other hand what can the editor do when the authors do not bother to communicate the change of their address, making any further communications difficult? But all this does not justify simultaneous submission under any circumstances. Editing and publishing a successful journal is not a part time job which at times is the case with journals published by various professional societies and organizations. The authors do not hear from them for months about the fate of their manuscripts. It is essential that every journal does have a proper secretariat and a minimum of staff to facilitate communication with the authors.

We in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences also face this problem of simultaneous submissions quite often. The authors indulge in simultaneous submission to more than one journal despite giving a written undertaking of exclusive submission. The authors have a right to withdraw a paper any time they wish but they should desist from such unethical practice of befooling the editors. Fortunately in over half a dozen cases, we were lucky as we came to know about the simultaneous submissions through our reviewers and other sources and these manuscripts were removed except in one case when the paper got published and it had to be retracted later on under intimation to the author and all others concerned.

A couple of months ago we received a paper

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“Association of glycemc status in a diabetic mother with neonatal complications”. The authors wanted to get it published immediately. They were told that there is no short cut and all manuscripts received have to go through the peer review system which takes some time and even after approval there was a waiting time for publication. They expressed the desire to withdraw the paper so that they can get it published somewhere else. Their right was upheld and the paper was allowed to be withdrawn. Similarly another manuscript which we had received from Turkey entitled “Role of Thrombophilia related to factor V Leiden and factor II G 202108 mutations in recurrent abortions” was sent for peer review and later the authors were asked to revise it in view of the reviewer’s comments and suggestions. We received the revised manuscript and it was accepted and scheduled for publication. When it was in press, the authors sent us an e-mail stating that they intend to withdraw the paper so that they can get it published in some other journal. Though it was quite difficult to withdraw the paper at such a last stage, we accepted the wish of the authors and obliged them.

Previously we did not ask for publication charges from authors from quite a few countries overseas. As the cost of production and maintenance of online edition became more prohibitive, we started asking them to pay the publication charges as well. However, it was made clear that those who cannot afford to pay, should write to us to waive off these charges and we did entertain all such requests. While acknowledging receipt of the manuscript it is also made clear that no good quality manuscript will be denied publication for want of publication charges.

In yet another case one of our valued readers and author from Saudi Arabia sent us three articles. One of them was accepted after revision and the whole peer review process, from receipt of manuscript to acceptance took over six months. While thanking us for the valuable advice and suggestions to improve one of the manuscripts, the author asked for withdraw-

ing the remaining two papers as the peer review was thought to be taking too much time. The author was allowed to withdraw the remaining two papers as it is the right of the authors.

In another case a manuscript was received from Iran entitled: “How does tryptase contribute to the psoriatic disease process”. It was approved after peer review and when it was under printing, we received an e-mail from the authors that after having sent this paper for publication, they had come across some new information which they would like to incorporate. Hence we were asked to withhold this publication. The authors promised to re-submit a revised manuscript soon. It was agreed and when we did not hear from them for few months, we wrote to them. Eventually it transpired that they had in fact sent it to some other journal and informed us that the paper should be considered withdrawn.

Dr. S. Iftikhar Ali from Saudi Arabia enquired through e-mail that he had sent a case report to a medical journal in Pakistan. It was accepted for publication and he also paid the publication charges. Now it is almost a year and neither the manuscript has been published nor there was any response from the editors. Can I submit this manuscript to you, he asked. He was advised to first formally withdraw the paper from the other journal, send us a copy of that letter and then we will be prepared to review his paper. After receipt of a copy of the withdrawal letter, that manuscript was sent for peer review. After approval, it was accepted and published in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences.<sup>3</sup> Another author withdrew the paper when he was sent the PDF for proof reading, hence it had to be taken out of the publication.

The whole idea of narrating the above few cases is to throw some light on the working of peer review system and what problems the editors have to face which are too familiar to other editor colleagues, but not known to majority of the authors.

More recently we have been dismayed at an incident of simultaneous submission. We re-

ceived a manuscript entitled "The optical parameters measurement for skin tissue imaging and auto-florescence in Vitro" from Mr. Shamaraz Firdous and colleagues on August 11, 2004. The authors were asked to give an undertaking that it was being exclusively contributed to Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences which they did. This paper was sent for peer review. The authors were advised to revise the manuscript incorporating the suggestions from the reviewers. They did it and the revised manuscript was received on January 18, 2005. It was accepted for publication on January 21, 2005 and the decision was conveyed to the authors that it will be included in our April-June 2005 issue. The PDF of the article was sent for proof reading which was duly returned. The main author also requested that he was not in a position to pay the publication charges, which were waived off. When this issue was in the press, we came to know that the same manuscript has already been published in Rawal Medical Journal.<sup>4</sup> We had to remove that paper, re-number all the pages before the issue was published after great financial loss and delay of almost two weeks.

We wrote to the authors and asked them how they sent this paper to another journal even after having given us the written undertaking confirming its exclusive submission to us. The reply received from the main author stated that "he had submitted this paper to Rawal Medical Journal (RMJ) during the first quarter of 2004 and had no response from them for three months. Even after reminders he heard nothing from them. Still he had no information and was not aware that it has been accepted by them and it has been either published or was under publication. He insisted that we publish this manuscript and he was prepared to withdraw it from RMJ which was certainly not possible since it had already been published.

Editor of RMJ stated that they were not aware of the fact that the authors had submitted this paper to some other journal as well. Further enquires revealed that the authors were lying since the date of submission of the manuscript printed in RMJ was August 10, 2004 just a

day before it was submitted to Pak J Med Sci and not the first quarter of 2004 as stated by the authors. They were again asked to explain their position but they failed to respond. This issue was discussed in detail and our final decision to black list all the authors of this manuscript, not to entertain any manuscript from them in future, was conveyed to them on July 4, 2005. Not only that this decision which gave detailed account of this episode was also conveyed to their instituton's head as well as all other relevant institutons like Pakistan Medical and Dental Council, Higher Education Commission and Editors of various medical journals published from Pakistan.

Eversince the start of online edition of Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences (pjms.com.pk) the number of manuscript that we are receiving from overseas has increased manifold.<sup>5</sup> We ask the authors to give us an undertaking regarding exclusive submission and this is also conveyed to them when we acknowledge their manuscript. We trust them and there is no way with us to know if they are getting these manuscripts published in some journals (in other languages) within their own countries as well. We receive quite a few manuscripts from our brotherly country Iran which are being published after peer review. Many a times they had to be revised, at times the reviewers and Editorial staff have to re-write some of these manuscripts improving its presentation and language. However, we feel concerned after having learnt from Dr. Farrokh Habibzadeh who also happens to be a member of our International Advisory Board. Participating in the discussion on simultaneous submission on the EMAME website, he states that "the problem of simultaneous submission is not uncommon in Iran. This is usually in the form of simultaneous submission to journal published from abroad and to a domestic (may be international) journal. Perhaps, one of the most important factors encouraging authors in need of prompt career promotion, is the long period of peer review in many of biomedical journals".<sup>6</sup>

We were able to detect one such case on July

3, 2005 when we received a manuscript from Iran. This manuscript from School of Medicine Jundi Shapour University of Medical Sciences, Ahwaz Iran was entitled "How to decrease the emotional impact of cadaver dissection among medical students". The author had also sent an undertaking that it was an unpublished material and if accepted for publication it will not be submitted to any other journal. But surprisingly, in the same e mail, we noted another letter addressed to an Editor in Iran stating that four copies of the same manuscript were being sent to him requesting that it should be published in "Journal of Medical Education." It was an incidental finding; hence we refused to accept this manuscript for consideration and expressed our inability to process it further. On hearing our decision the author wrote back stating that as per promotion rules in the University, she can only be promoted from assistant to associate professor if her manuscript is published in an overseas journal. The author requested that we accept the manuscript as she had withdrawn it from Journal of Medical Education, to which we agreed.

As stated by Dr. Farrokh Habibzadeh, it is quite possible that some of these Iranian authors may be getting some of their manuscripts published in medical journals published in Persian or other local journals as well. There is no way to find that out and one can only trust the authors when they give an undertaking of exclusive submission.

All the manuscripts received by us are immediately acknowledged and after getting an undertaking of exclusive submission, they are processed. In order to save time, some of the manuscripts which suffer from serious deficiencies are returned immediately within a day or two advising the authors to re-write and revise them. Though getting good quality reviewers is another problem but all efforts are made to accelerate the whole peer review process and keep the authors informed of developments concerning their manuscripts. At times repeated re-submissions with little or no useful input as regards revision from some of the authors takes up Editors limited resources

which includes time, patience and good will as well. However, this intellectual dishonesty of simultaneous submission despite having given a written undertaking is not at all acceptable.

According to Dr. Farrokh Habibzadeh in Iran "a movement guided by Editors and Deputy of Research in Universities of Medical Sciences in Iran has taken place to face this bad practice by establishing some penalties for those who does simultaneous submissions."<sup>6</sup>

Editors of medical journals and institutons like EMAME need to take up this issue seriously and formulate some guidelines for the journals to follow. The organizers of the Third Regional Conference on Medical Journals being held in Shiraz, Iran in January 2006 should include this important issue in the programme for discussion and debate. Publication of titles of the manuscripts received for publication with date of receipt which are under process by various medical journals, could be one way whereby simultaneous submissions may be detected at least within the country. However, this may not work in case of overseas medical journals and here again the Editors will have to trust the authors. Black listing authors who indulge in simultaneous submissions may not be enough and certain other penalties should also be suggested. This is the only way we can overcome and control this curse and menace.

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