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EDITORIAL

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Post-publication retraction and the erosion of editorial integrity: A call for adherence to COPE standards

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ARTICLE HISTORY

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Every peer-reviewed article is bound by a contract. Authors submit their work for consideration, journals subject it to one or more peer-reviewers, the article is edited and improved based upon responses to the reviewers' comments, and upon acceptance the record is contracted, published, copyrighted, and open for commentary through the letter-to-the editor mechanism. Any time before final acceptance, the journal has complete authority to reject the paper. It is up to the peer-review process to safeguard against research fraud [1,2]. Once the editorial process has concluded, the editor, journal, and publisher have an obligation to comply with the guidelines established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) [3].

COPE's guidance on retraction is neither ambiguous nor discretionary. Retraction is reserved for clear evidence that findings are unreliable, whether through misconduct, admitted error, or fraud. COPE does not provide a basis to quibble about references or various claims. The journal had ample opportunity to handle those through the peer-review process. As with any paper, there are readers who are likely to have questions, add their input, or even disagree with the author's conclusions. In this circumstance readers should be invited to submit a letter to the editor. The editor should not engage with the authors in a post-publication inquiry and iterative set of questions and responses. If the COPE guidelines have been clearly violated, retraction is explicitly framed as a last resort, to be undertaken transparently, with documentation, and with the authors' right of response preserved.

PubPeer was conceived as an anonymous commenting platform, it now functions as an accusation mechanism whose output routinely triggers formal retraction proceedings [4]. An anonymous post alleging figure duplication, statistical irregularity, or image manipulation is public, permanent, and indexed, yet the accuser cannot be cross-examined, their credentials verified, and they bear no liability for a false claim. Journals, confronted with a flagged paper and the reputational risk of inaction, initiate post-publication internal reviews that are frequently driven by administrative pressure rather than scientific merit. Authors are then asked to produce additional data, new references, and alterations to the original manuscript — sometimes years after the work was completed, the copyright transferred, and the contract closed. The result can be a retraction driven less by demonstrable invalidity of the findings than by unresolved concerns about their presentation, interpretation, or public reception. This is the inverse of COPE's model, in which named, responsible parties raise specific, substantiated concerns through established channels.

In practice, Retraction Watch often extends disputes that begin within journals into the broader public arena, where reputational consequences may arise before scientific disagreements are fully resolved [5]. It maintains a database of retractions and publicizes them far beyond the scientific community, framing coverage around an accusatory narrative —research fraud, questionable science—rather than the substance of the underlying disagreement. Author reputations are damaged without any finding of misconduct, often before the authors have had an opportunity to republish the paper in another journal. Retractions become career-ending instruments, cited by universities, funders, and media outlets that work to discredit authors publishing observations while advancing the interests of third parties. The consequences can be profound, particularly when retractions occur without findings of misconduct, leaving authors with limited opportunities to challenge public perceptions once they become established. Authors face named, indexed, permanent allegations and no forum in which to clear their names. The manuscript itself is injured. Furman et al found that retraction causes an "immediate, severe, and long-lived decline in future citations" to the retracted work [6].

Retractions before the pandemic were largely valid as determined by Fang and coworkers [7–9]. Since the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, many observers have noted that disputes surrounding retractions have become concentrated in a small number of scientifically and politically contentious areas. COPE-violating retraction campaigns cluster around categories of findings that threaten commercial or institutional interests. Critics have argued that studies of repurposed generic therapies often encounter levels of scrutiny that appear disproportionate when compared with some published industry-sponsored investigations of patented products. Researchers in vaccine safety have argued that observational studies suggesting potential adverse-event signals are often criticized with institutional bias, especially when their findings challenge prevailing public-health messaging regarding vaccine hesitancy [10]. Environmental and industrial exposure research linking microplastics, heavy metals, and pesticides to chronic disease is held to impossible thresholds [11]. In each case, a post-publication retraction — works to injure the journal that conducted proper peer-review and publication as well as the authors who have spent years on their work.

Scientific publishing operates within a network of competing interests that includes journals, universities, professional societies, funding agencies, regulators, industry sponsors, and advocacy organizations. Most participants act in good faith; nevertheless, institutional incentives can influence how scientific disputes are interpreted and resolved. Because retraction carries substantial reputational consequences, decisions regarding correction or withdrawal of published work should be transparent, evidence-based, and consistent with COPE guidance. The greater the public controversy surrounding a finding, the greater the obligation to ensure

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procedural fairness is maintained. Critics contend that retraction has, at times, evolved beyond a corrective mechanism into a tool capable of influencing which viewpoints remain visible within the scientific record. What may begin as an anonymous online criticism can rapidly progress into a post-publication editorial review and public scrutiny, with consequences for authors that often extend well beyond the underlying scientific questions. Retraction as currently practiced destroys the presumption of good faith upon which scientific disagreement depends, converting legitimate dispute into punishment and ensuring that rational researchers avoid any finding that invites scrutiny. It rewrites the historical record, so that future investigators cannot see hypotheses tested, observations, analyses, or conclusions that were contested. The possibility of post-publication challenges may discourage investigators from entering some of the most controversial and least-funded areas of inquiry. More concerning is the possibility that retraction processes may, intentionally or unintentionally, reinforce existing institutional and commercial priorities while limiting the visibility of dissenting scientific perspectives.

A path back to integrity is available but requires COPE guidelines enforcement. Anonymity must not be permitted to trigger retraction proceedings; adverse comments from concealeed sources must get a call from the journal demanding transparency and requesting letters to the editor. COPE guidance must be applied as written, with letters to the editor and corrections if need published by erratum. Independent appeals bodies with author representation and published reasoning must be established. Published work must retain a presumption of validity, absent proven scientific misconduct or fraud. Every entity in the retraction ecosystem (PubPeer, Retraction Watch) must disclose its funding relationships. The scientific record belongs to no company, no agency, and no anonymous commenter. It belongs to the public and the researchers who dedicated their efforts to generate new knowledge and understanding. Post-publication retraction, as currently weaponized, is censorship, and the cost is paid in the therapies never developed, the signals never investigated, and the patients who never learn what might have helped them.

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