

Commentary

Journal of the Renin-Angiotensin-Aldosterone System
2015, Vol. 16(4) 701
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DOI: 10.1177/1470320315623658
jra.sagepub.com



Earlier this year Biomed Central retracted 43 papers submitted by medical researchers in China due to their concerns that the peer review process on these papers had been compromised by the supply of fabricated reviewers by either the authors or third-party agencies. This was reported in the *Lancet* (Volume 385, Issue 9976, 1365). Since then, there have been more retractions involving manipulation of the peer review process at other publishers.

JRAAS has conducted a systematic evaluation of papers in which acceptance was influenced by reviewers nominated by the authors. In a substantial number of cases (21 identified during the course of this investigation), the Journal has established that although the nominated reviewers were real, their email addresses were falsified. We have traced the actual nominated reviewers and, where we received a response, those individuals have denied submitting a review of the relevant manuscript. This represents a clear case of identity fraud. Authorship was common to the majority of the papers.

Eight of these papers were published and have now been retracted by the journal. The remainder were being processed by the journal prior to publication and have now been rejected. All authors have been notified together with the institutions from which they were submitted. In several cases where the offending authors have published extensively in other journals, the editors of those journals have

been informed of our concerns about the manipulation of the peer review process.

The editors of JRAAS have taken the decision to immediately suspend the use of author nominated reviewers. We would strongly urge other journal editors and their respective publishers to take similar actions. Forensic investigation reveals certain clues to fraudulent reviews including the use of non-institutional email addresses, email domains based in a country different from that of the named reviewer and the recurrent nomination of individuals from a “panel” of reviewers. The reviews are often brief, formulaic and contain common phrases despite apparently being from different reviewers.

As the *Lancet* pointed out, scientific fraud is a global concern and it is no doubt fuelled by the fact that many evaluation and promotion systems rely heavily on publication output. A wealth of outstanding science is conducted around the world and it is unfortunate that actions described here paint a very tarnished view of the scientific culture.

We are prepared to share our experience with other journal publishers if we can assist in eliminating this fraudulent practice which clearly is now far more widespread than many believed.

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