What we are doing to help researchers publish their papers in our journal

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Introduction
In recent years, the Editors of many medical journals have had to rethink how they check submitted manuscripts. The reason for this is the increasing stream of likely fabricated manuscripts that have been submitted by errant authors directly or via so-called ‘paper mills’.1 Clever investigative work has revealed the massive extent of the paper-mill and data fabrication problem.2,3 Such investigations have led to hundreds of retractions across an array of journals.4 Editors of respectable scholarly journals (including us at The Journal of International Medical Research (JIMR)) have reviewed and strengthened their checking and peer review steps.5 However, no system of checks is yet foolproof and paper mills will no doubt continue to try and beat the system.6 Thus, we can expect organisations such as Retraction Watch to continue its conscientious reporting of historical and new paper-mill papers.7

While we have introduced many new checks in our peer review and decision-making processes, we have also enhanced the steps we take to ensure we can continue to assist researchers as much as possible. This Editorial explains the steps JIMR has taken to detect probable fabricated manuscripts and to aid the publication of genuine research.

Chinese researchers and the ‘Early Warning Journal List’
The National Science Library of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS library in short) has published an ‘early warning’ list of journals.8 It is commendable that it includes a ‘high-risk’ list of journals, the aim of which is to curb academic misconduct (e.g. by paper mills). CAS also has ‘medium’ and ‘low-risk’ categories and JIMR has been placed on their ‘medium-risk’ list. This might be because of a perceived low internationalization. However, while JIMR does publish many articles by Chinese authors, it is international in outlook in terms of editorial board, peer reviewers and audience.

The reason why JIMR publishes many Chinese-authored articles is because we offer an in-depth edit of all manuscripts
before publication, which is highly appreciated by our authors in China and other countries that have English as a second language (ESOL – see more about this in our English for speakers of other languages section below).

Thus, we recommend that researchers and institutions in China consult the CAS library watchlist judiciously – i.e. they should separate journals in the ‘high-risk’ category from journals that appear in the ‘medium’ and ‘low-risk’ categories. An important consideration is to always select a trusted journal from a reputable publisher.

How JIMR is helping genuine researchers

JIMR’s reputation

JIMR is now 50 years old and was acquired by SAGE Publishing Ltd in 2017. As mentioned, we have built up a solid reputation, especially in ESOL countries such as China, because of our professionalism and international outlook. Journal metrics, such as impact factor (IF), also play a part in a journal’s reputation; however, such metrics need to be interpreted carefully. For example, JIMR publishes many high-quality and well-cited original research and review articles; however, we choose to publish all levels of evidence, including interesting and novel case reports and negative studies, both of which are usually less well cited than research articles and reviews. Thus, our overall IF will be less than journals that publish, for example, only reviews and clinical trials but no case reports.

What has JIMR done to detect and reject probable fabricated manuscripts?

We incorporate multiple steps that help us identify paper-mill manuscripts. While most of these steps have been mentioned in various articles and are now in use by reputable publishers,9–11 we have also introduced our own checks so that we can attempt to further outwit the paper mills. Data science is also playing a large part in our investigations. Other publishers no doubt also have their own idiosyncratic add-ons and, like us, will not divulge these fully, as that may help the paper mills find ways around our checks. What we can say is that our upfront and ongoing checks currently reveal that about 15% of submissions to JIMR are likely from paper mills, and these are rejected.

Our checks are performed during initial manuscript evaluation and also at later stages, as necessary – e.g. during peer review, at revision stages, and even during technical editing and production. In broad terms, our checks include the following:

- Asking authors:
  - to prove their research work was carried out at their institution and with correct approval
  - to show us their previous publications and experience in the particular research area
  - for original data
- Using refined methods to check for manuscript flaws and data fabrication.

While these extra upfront checks take more time than before, it means that we can devote more time during peer review to authors of genuine research.

Rigorous peer review and checks for editorial consistency

Any manuscript that passes our enhanced checks is allowed to enter the peer review process. For peer review, we insist on getting comments from at least two independent peer reviewers selected from a worldwide pool of peer researchers. At decision stage, we evaluate their comments and
give them a specific and comprehensive set of comments (‘From the Editor’) that includes essential items for them to check/include before their manuscript may be accepted. This thorough check for editorial consistency is important to us and is well received by our authors – see ‘Tips on how to get published in JIMR’ section.

Helping ESOL authors

As well as our checks for consistency, we also give every accepted manuscript an in-depth technical and grammar edit. This is something that is missing from most other journals, but we are proud to offer this service, and it is especially liked by ESOL authors and explains why we publish many Chinese-authored papers. However, we are international in outlook: all of JIMR’s papers are free to view worldwide on our own website and on PubMed Central. This makes the journal very appealing to researchers who wish to reach an international audience. In fact, the proportion of submissions from ESOL countries other than China has been increasing – from 11% in January 2021 to over 30% up to February 2022. We expect this trend to continue as more ESOL authors worldwide realise what JIMR offers.

Tips for researchers about where to publish

Researchers are rightly concerned about where to publish their work. Firstly, they need to make sure that any journal of interest is absolutely not a counterfeit journal (i.e. sometimes called ‘predatory’ journal), and that it performs essential checks to try and prevent paper mill manuscripts being published.

The next thing is to select a trusted journal from a reputable publisher. Researchers may focus on only high-IF journals but this is not always feasible and even these journals have been targeted by paper mills. Their main consideration must be to separate so-called predatory and low-quality journals from high-quality journals. Box 1 provides a list of points for authors to consider when they are trying to select a journal for publication of their research.

Tips on how to get published in JIMR

JIMR welcomes innovative and relevant preclinical and clinical research (interventional and observational studies), systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. Case reports and narrative reviews that enhance clinical understanding will also be considered. Here we present some key information that authors of genuine research should check/include when they submit their manuscripts to us.

Guidance

- Follow the submission guidelines on our website. Also look at the published papers on our website to help you construct your manuscript.
- Follow ICJME and COPE guidance and report your study according to the relevant Equator network guideline. Shanahan et al. have published a helpful flowchart about selecting an appropriate reporting guideline.
- Clinical trials must be registered. You need to state the registration number at the end of your Abstract, and in your Methods section.
- All animal studies must follow the ‘Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals, 8th Edition.’

Provenance

- Authorship: only include persons who were involved in your research. You
should use the same email address (used only by you) that you’ve used in previous publications

- Make sure that you can provide the Editors with your publication record via PubMed, Google Scholar or similar (e.g. Baidu Scholar, current ORCiD iD with your details available to view)

- Cover letter: explain the relevance and novelty of your study and what it adds to the literature

- Methods section: include the name of your ethics review board, its location, approval number, and date of approval. We might request a copy of your approval document either from you or from your institution for verification of details.

**Box 1. Points for researchers to consider when selecting a journal.**

- Separate low-quality journals from high-quality journals:
  - For open access journals, check to see if it is indexed by the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) \(^\text{15}\)
  - Check that the journal is published by a reputable publisher \(^\text{16}\)

- A high-quality journal does not automatically mean it needs to have a high IF \(^\text{17}\):
  - Some journals have a high IF because they exclude low-cited papers such as case reports and include more highly-cited papers such as reviews
  - Some high-quality journals have a lower IF than others because they choose to publish all levels of evidence

- Choose journals with high standards. Check their websites and look for the following:
  - A clear aims and scope
  - Detailed submission guidelines. Online submission
  - Compliance with guidelines such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICME) \(^\text{18}\), the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) \(^\text{19}\) and the Equator network \(^\text{20}\)
  - Clear statements about their peer review process
  - Extra care such as editorial assistance at peer review stages (helpful comments from the Editor) and before publication (e.g. editing)
  - Page charges that are reasonable for the work involved to get your manuscript published (e.g. rigorous peer review and editing are time-consuming tasks but worth it)
  - Indexing in databases such as DOAJ, MEDLINE, and PubMed. Free-to-view online and in PubMed Central
  - Good journal reputation (recommended by peers, professional approach by the editorial team, international audience, metrics consistent with scope of articles being published)

IF: impact factor.

**Manuscript essentials**

- Indicate the type of study in your Abstract and Methods sections (e.g. case control study, cross-sectional study, cohort study, retrospective, prospective study, randomised controlled trial, and so on)

- Check your Methods section so that fellow researchers may reproduce your methodology from the description you have given \(^\text{25,26}\)

- Patient consent is required for all prospective clinical studies and clinical trials. Patient details must be de-identified for all studies and case reports

- Check that your choice of statistics is appropriate for your study. Also, include your sample size calculation, if appropriate
Results: present your results clearly and concisely in the text and in figures/tables. Ensure you can send us original research data (e.g. full western blots), if requested, so that our expert checkers may verify your work.

Discussion: compare your results with previous papers, and cite those papers (limit self-citation); discuss the relevance and novelty of your study and what it adds to the literature; state its limitations and what are your next steps.

Do not overstate your conclusions – bear in mind the type of study and number of patients you selected.

Transparency

Include full details about funding (for the study and for any editing), authors’ contributions and availability of data. In your acknowledgement section, state if you used a medical writing or editing agency (i.e. legitimate ‘third-party’ agency) to compile/edit your manuscript. State also if they submitted the manuscript on your behalf.

Conclusions

The important messages we’d like to convey are the following:

- Reputable journals, including JIMR, have taken steps to strengthen their checking and peer review procedures because of paper mill submissions.
- Authors of genuine research need to avoid so-called predatory journals and select a journal with high-quality standards. This does not necessarily mean aiming for high IF journals only. At JIMR, we publish research articles that are well cited but also publish case reports and negative studies because we believe these are also an important part of medicine.
- Interpret any watchlists carefully: lists of known so-called predatory journals are commendable and must be taken seriously. Other lists that are more informational should be evaluated more judiciously – for example, JIMR provides a technical edit and grammar improvement step which attracts an ESOL authorship, especially from China; however, we have an international editorial board and utilise peer reviewers from around the world, and our articles reach a global audience of fellow researchers.

We trust this Editorial gives authors continuing confidence to submit their manuscripts to JIMR, and that they find the sections about where to publish and how to publish in JIMR useful.

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Authors’ contributions

GM conceived the idea and wrote the initial draft. MT reviewed the draft and suggested changes. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript. Both authors meet the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) criteria for authorship for this article, take responsibility for the integrity of the work, and have given their approval for this version to be published.

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