

1 Editorial

2 Publication Governance in *Clinical Nutrition*

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38 One of the best ways to disseminate research findings is to publish them in a respected
39 peer-reviewed journal in the field. This is the goal of most researchers and as the impact
40 factor of a journal rises, the number of submissions usually increases. This is the case for our
41 society journal: *Clinical Nutrition*. Unfortunately, the quest for a peer-reviewed publication
42 in a high impact journal, tempts some researchers to cut corners, either knowingly or
43 unknowingly. This is a dangerous practice and lack of publication governance could bring
44 authors [1], co-authors [2], reviewers, editors [3] and journals into disrepute. We would like
45 to highlight some instances of potential malpractice discovered in relation to articles
46 submitted to *Clinical Nutrition* in the recent past and hope that this editorial will serve as a
47 deterrent to such practices.

48

49 **Appropriate permissions**

- 50 ● All prospective studies must have ethics committee/institutional review board
51 (IRB)/animal licence approval prior to commencement. Other appropriate approvals,
52 when necessary (e.g. Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency - MHRA),
53 should also be in place. Although ethics committee/IRB approval may not be
54 necessary for all retrospective studies, at the very least the protocol should be
55 registered with the audit office (or similar body) of the institution and permission for
56 the study should be obtained. The body providing approval and the approval number
57 should be mentioned in the methods section of the manuscript. Retrospective
58 registration is not acceptable.

59

60 **Consent**

- 61 ● All participants in prospective studies must have provided informed written consent.
62 Consent may not be essential for retrospective studies, but authors must provide
63 evidence that they have obtained permission to use the data.

64

65 **The case of clinical trial/study registration**

- 66 ● A systematic review submitted recently included a statement that the protocol had
67 been registered with an appropriate database
68 (<https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/>). A registration number was provided, but
69 this did not match the style of the database. When the database was searched, the
70 protocol could not be found.
- 71 ● Recently a paper was submitted that had the correct reference to an approved
72 clinical trial registration (<https://clinicaltrials.gov>). On checking with the registry, it
73 was found that that the registered design of the study was different from what was
74 reported in the submission. One group of participants had been omitted from the
75 submitted paper.
- 76 ● It is also the duty of the authors to update the progress of the study and the results
77 in the registry.

78

79 **The case of not following the recommended method of reporting**

- 80 ● Papers on randomised controlled trials and systematic reviews that have not
81 adhered to the CONSORT (<http://www.consort-statement.org>) or PRISMA
82 (<http://www.prisma-statement.org>) statement guidelines have been submitted.
83 Other guidelines are available for other types of studies (e.g. STROBE statement
84 guidelines for observational studies: [https://strobe-](https://strobe-statement.org/index.php?id=strobe-home)
85 [statement.org/index.php?id=strobe-home](https://strobe-statement.org/index.php?id=strobe-home)). Details of checklists appropriate for
86 various types of studies can be found at the Enhancing the QUALity and Transparency
87 Of health Research (EQUATOR) Network website (<http://www.equator-network.org>).
88 ● The checklist submitted along with the paper must be accurate. In a recent
89 submission, the authors stated in the CONSORT checklist that the sample size
90 calculation was on page 5 of the manuscript. However, on checking the manuscript,
91 there was no mention of sample size calculation anywhere.

92

93 **The case of authorship and “gift” authorship**

- 94 ● A paper with 21 authors was submitted, with the contributions of at least 7 of them
95 listed as “intellectual input”. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has
96 guidelines on authorship and contributorship [4] and these should be adhered to.
97 Authors should be involved in all stages of the research process and this includes
98 protocol development, data collection/analysis/interpretation, writing of the
99 manuscript, critical review and final approval of the submitted manuscript.
100 Gratuitous and gift authorship is a dangerous practice as a potentially fraudulent
101 publication could bring all authors into disrepute [5]. All authors must be in a
102 position to take responsibility for the data presented and their interpretation, and
103 should be able to defend the paper. Equally, excluding persons who may potentially
104 qualify for authorship must also be avoided.
- 105 ● When the revised version of a paper was submitted, the editors found that one of
106 the reviewers had been added to the list of authors. The authors were not aware
107 that the person had reviewed the paper, but the reviewer had not been consulted by
108 the authors, nor had he/she agreed to be an author. In addition, on review of the
109 revised version, the reviewer did not notice the change in authorship. This led to the
110 paper being rejected by the editors as the whole review process was severely
111 compromised and rendered null and void.
- 112 ● We recently had a case in which a scientist who had a very substantial role in the
113 study and writing of the manuscript was excluded from authorship. The paper had to
114 be retracted because the authors could not agree on a change in authorship and
115 some modification of the content of the manuscript.
- 116 ● Addition/deletion of authors when revisions are submitted must be avoided. If this is
117 absolutely necessary, justification for this must be provided along with consent.
- 118 ● There should be a logical relationship between the number of co-authors and the
119 work discussed. Some journals limit the number of co-authors to maximum of 8,

120 unless adequate justification can be provided. A large number of authors may be
121 justifiable for large scale multi-centre trials, but this should not be the case for small
122 single centre studies, especially when many authors from outside the institution are
123 included. Co-workers who have contributed to some but not all aspects of the study
124 can be added as collaborators or contributors rather than authors. Although the
125 names of collaborators or contributors do not appear on the masthead, they will
126 have a citable reference in Medline and other indexing databases.

- 127 ● *Clinical Nutrition* sends an email to all co-authors informing them that a paper has
128 been submitted. If authors feel that they should not be an author on the paper or if
129 they have not approved the submitted version, they should contact the journal
130 office immediately. These disputes are easier to resolve at early stages in the
131 submission process than after publication.
- 132 ● Ghost authors such as medical writers who help authors develop and write
133 manuscripts should be mentioned in the acknowledgements
134 ([https://www.emwa.org/about-us/position-statements/ghostwriting-positioning-](https://www.emwa.org/about-us/position-statements/ghostwriting-positioning-statement/)
135 [statement/](https://www.emwa.org/about-us/position-statements/ghostwriting-positioning-statement/)). Language editors should also be acknowledged.

136

137 **Declaration of interests**

- 138 ● There have been several instances of the declaration of interests forms not being
139 filled in by the individuals concerned, but being proxied by the corresponding
140 author. It is vital that the individual authors complete the declaration of interests
141 forms themselves and declare all direct, indirect and potential conflicts of interest.
142 These need not be directly related to the paper under consideration, but must be
143 stated in the interests of transparency [6].

144

145 **The case of plagiarism and self-plagiarism**

- 146 ● Several instances of plagiarism and self-plagiarism [7] have been detected. The
147 journal runs an electronic check on all papers submitted and cases of plagiarism and
148 self-plagiarism are flagged automatically.
- 149 ● Recently the same group of authors submitted two papers using the same study
150 design on two different groups of patients. The plagiarism check highlighted >60%
151 overlap of text between the two papers.
- 152 ● Editors usually apply discretion and common sense, but high levels of overlap may
153 lead to rejection of papers.

154

155 **The case of duplicate publication**

- 156 ● The results of a study were submitted by two different researchers from the same
157 team in two different journals, one paper was already published, while the other
158 submission was still under consideration. This was of course noticed, and a major
159 dispute followed. Finally, the published paper was modified to include the authors of
160 the submitted paper, while also updating some of the information in the paper. This

161 was only possible protracted discussion with the authors. The alternative would have
162 been retraction of the published paper and that was something the authors wanted
163 to avoid. Dual or duplicate publication is not a rare practice and must be avoided at
164 all costs [8].

165

166 **The case of salami slicing**

- 167 ● While it is tempting to publish more than one paper from a single study, it is
168 preferable to combine the results into one paper rather than duplicate them. This
169 practice of salami slicing should be avoided [9]. Sometimes it may be justified to
170 publish more than one paper from a single study, provided these are very different.
171 In this situation, the authors should mention this upfront and submit a copy of the
172 published/accepted paper so that the reviewers and editors may make an informed
173 judgement.

174

175 **The case of intellectual property and reporting**

- 176 ● In a paper, the proprietary name of a nutritional supplement was mentioned and
177 studied, but product name was used without approval from the owners of the
178 original supplement composition trademark. This is comparable to the situation in
179 which a product named XYZ has been sold and another company makes a product
180 with the same name, but with a different composition, but still uses the available
181 marketing information and brand name recognition of the original product XYZ. This
182 is an example of the need to be very careful when studying commercial products
183 without knowledge of the validity of the product. In this instance there was a
184 protracted dispute between the two companies and the authors, with the
185 publication of corrigenda.

186

187 **The question of apportioning blame**

- 188 ● When problems were discovered with a recent paper, the senior author blamed an
189 overenthusiastic first author for the misdemeanour. It must be remembered that the
190 ultimate responsibility for the integrity of a paper rests with all authors. However,
191 the first, senior and corresponding authors have primary responsibility for ensuring
192 that communication between all authors occurs and potential misdemeanours are
193 avoided.

194

195 **The case of incorrect citations**

- 196 ● Incorrect references supporting statements made in manuscripts have been found. It
197 is the responsibility of authors to ensure that the references are both correct and
198 accurate [10].
- 199 ● Inaccurate interpretation of published work must also be avoided.
- 200 ● In a recently submitted systematic review, the authors chose to omit a number of
201 eligible studies without providing a reason. This was detected and the paper was

202 rejected. Selective citation of the literature to support the authors' biases must be
203 avoided.

204

205 **Reviewers**

- 206 ● While it is understood that reviewers provide a very valuable service to the journal
207 and that their time is not compensated for, it would be appreciated if reviewers
208 would decline to review as soon as they receive an invitation if they feel they do not
209 have the time or if the manuscript is outside their field of expertise.
- 210 ● However, once reviewers have accepted an invitation, it would also be appreciated if
211 they would submit their reviews on time.
- 212 ● Reviewers should decline invitations if they feel that they have a conflict of interest
213 (e.g. if they are a rival of the authors, if they have collaborated with or have joint
214 publications with the authors, or if they have financial or other interests in the paper
215 submitted).
- 216 ● An insightful evaluation of the manuscript helps the editors make an appropriate
217 decision. One line comments such as "this is a good paper: accept" or "this is a very
218 poor paper: reject" are not very helpful ([https://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/how-
219 to-review](https://www.elsevier.com/reviewers/how-to-review)).

220

221 **Sanitising the reviewers' comments**

- 222 ● In the rebuttal letter to reviewers, some authors choose to delete the comments
223 that they do not wish to reply to. This is unacceptable practice. While it is not
224 necessary for authors to make all the changes suggested by reviewers, authors
225 should make it clear why they have chosen not to modify the manuscript in response
226 to certain comments.

227

228 **Author email addresses**

- 229 ● Ideally institutional email addresses rather than generic email addresses (e.g.
230 hotmail, gmail, yahoo, etc.) should be provided in the submission details. Generic
231 email addresses may be acceptable in certain circumstances, e.g. when an author is
232 in the process of changing institutions.

233

234 **Errors and omissions**

- 235 ● Authors are human and honest errors do occur. When these errors are found after
236 publication, it is the duty of authors to submit a timely corrigendum to the journal
237 and rectify the errors [11].
- 238 ● Serious errors may involve self-retraction of the paper by the authors.

239

240 **Potential consequences**

241 These practices, whether intentional or not, pose serious problems and also result in a huge
242 waste of time of both the reviewers and the editors. In serious cases, the Dean/Head of the

243 Institution where the authors work will be informed. At the extreme, misdemeanours could
244 lead to retraction of papers, disciplinary action against authors or even termination of
245 academic appointments.

246

247 **Some advice**

248 Case studies in publication misdemeanour that have led to retraction of papers and/or
249 disciplinary action against authors can be found at <https://retractionwatch.com>. Authors are
250 also advised to study the COPE guidelines (<https://publicationethics.org>) and also the
251 checklists provided by the EQUATOR Network (<http://www.equator-network.org>) before
252 drafting their manuscripts. They should also read the instructions to authors provided by
253 the journal and ensure that their submissions conform to them. While all authors should
254 assume responsibility for submissions, it is primarily the responsibility of the first, senior and
255 corresponding authors to vouch for the authenticity of the submission and to ensure that all
256 aspects of research and publication governance have been adhered to.

257

258 Authors remain responsible for the content of the publication. The publisher, the editorial
259 board and the reviewers do not have primary responsibility for the content of the
260 publication. Their role is to help the author to have the best possible publication. Even when
261 an author is a very respected scientist with 500 publications, one publication of the 500 that
262 has problems similar to those discussed in this editorial, can lead to the remaining 499
263 publications being viewed with a different perspective, and this usually includes suspicion
264 and greater scrutiny. When publication misdemeanour (e.g. falsified results,
265 misinterpretation of data, manipulated figures, etc.) has been proven, all publications of all
266 authors will be scrutinised and this usually leads to finding more publications with problems
267 [1, 2]. Therefore, all authors remain responsible for the content of the publication.

268

269 **Conclusion**

270 It is hoped that this editorial will help authors understand some of the potential pitfalls
271 associated with publication and will enable them to submit better papers. Paying attention
272 to detail will speed up the review process and also result in higher acceptance rates. It will
273 also avoid disputes which, sometimes, can be acrimonious, result in retraction of papers
274 [12] and lead to disciplinary action.

275

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285 **Author contributions**

286 Both authors conceived, wrote and critically revised the article, and have approved the
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288

289

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