

Scientific and ethical concerns after publication

Concerns and queries may be raised soon or many decades after publication, in print or electronic media (e.g. social media posts). The spectrum is wide and includes unreliability of the data, unethical research, plagiarism, paper-mill submissions, citation manipulation, undeclared use of generative artificial intelligence, and compromised peer review.

The purpose of assessing concerns is to correct the literature and not to punish authors

Assessment

Post-publication assessment may include:

- Request for third parties to clarify their concerns and queries
- Examination of original submissions, reviewers' reports, revisions
- Assessment of author responses
- Assessment of deidentified data and data analysis files
- Evaluation of study documents (e.g. protocol, ethics review, trial registration, funding)
- Clarification of author roles

Account should be taken of:

- Reporting, ethical and integrity guidelines at the time of publication
- Data retention and sharing policies and regulations at the time of publication
- The passage of time with data no longer available for assessment
- Concerns that 'bad character' evidence in allegations can be prejudicial and lead to false conclusions
- Allowing sufficient time for authors/institutions to respond to concerns

Assessment may be undertaken by editors, publishers and independent experts

Actions and outcomes

These include:

- Publishing a correction/erratum, editor's note, or an expression of concern
- Retracting the article with or without replacement
- Withdrawing the publication
- Taking no action (i.e. the publication remains unchanged)
- Notifying those who raised concerns and the author(s) of the action taken

Challenges

- Allegations may be aggressive, threatening or personal, and may involve many publications and different publishers
- Allegations may be made without giving authors/institutions the opportunity to respond
- Authors/institutions may not respond to requests for information by editors and publishers
- Authors may have stopped publishing or be deceased, or institutions may no longer exist
- Original study records (paper or electronic) may no longer exist or be corrupted
- Data retention and archiving policies have changed over time
- Sharing information must comply with data protection legislation, and informed consent is required for sharing human participant data
- Journal records may no longer be available or exist, especially if they predate electronic submission systems

Further information

Committee on Publication Ethics <https://publicationethics.org>

EQUATOR network <https://www.equator-network.org>

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors <https://www.icmje.org>