When Good Intentions—Open-Access Publishing—Take a Wrong Turn

Discovering new knowledge in a trustworthy manner—so trustworthy that we would be willing to alter our care of the sick and injured—is precisely the purpose of research. Although infractions of credible research processes do occur, adhering to established research strategies and to acknowledging infractions if they occur contributes to research findings being trustworthy. Such findings have the potential of (a) improving care and thereby care outcomes for children and adults with cancer, and (b) sustaining support for the caregiving efforts of their family and professional care providers. Following the discovery of new knowledge and the acknowledgment of infractions that could have possibly influenced findings is the sharing of research findings. Sharing of findings also needs to occur in a trustworthy manner. Highly valued by researchers is sharing trustworthy findings as quickly as possible to benefit others as soon as possible. One approach to making credible research findings quickly available to all is open-access publishing. These motives for open-access publishing are respectable and important.

Open access publishing has been sought by individual authors, editors, professional societies and by governments. Research papers from studies federally funded in the United States are under government mandate to be made publicly available and at no cost. These research papers have completed journal peer-review processes as part of their acceptance for publication. Journals, including Cancer Nursing: An International Journal of Cancer Care, have adopted open-access opportunities for authors. (Cancer Nursing also provides online availability of accepted manuscripts ahead of print to speed the access to new knowledge to all readers.) There is now a cadre of open-access journals, most of which charge a fee for the publication of the accepted papers. Fees vary in amount from less than $500 to more than $3000 for each accepted paper.

Regrettably, a parallel spin-off business with apparently quite different motives has resulted. This spin-off business has been named “predatory publishing” and is defined as publishers who have the intent to deceive authors into submitting their manuscripts to their journal in the belief that the journal is legitimate and who then profit financially from the deception through charging fees to the authors. Authors report being asked to pay these fees for their paper being published only after it is accepted and deny having been aware of fees until that point. In addition to creating journals not considered legitimate (not indexed by established groups and not included in standard periodical directories or catalogues), predatory publishing can also include impact factors being fabricated by the publisher and in other ways not meeting the code of conduct for publishers (eg, Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) Code of Conduct [http://oaspa.org/membership/code-of-conduct/] or Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) Code of Conduct for Journal Publishers [http://publicationethics.org/files/Code%20of%20Conduct%20for%20Journal%20Publishers%20FINAL_1_0.pdf]). Oftentimes the address of these predatory publishers is a mailbox.

The particularly concerning outcome of this wrong turn of good intentions is that peer review is commonly sacrificed (submitted papers published within hours to days of submission). Peer review is one of the cornerstones of scientific publishing’s services. Minus that review process, trustworthiness of the overall publication process is immediately diminished. Academic systems have been described as overwhelmed by the sudden surge of publishing by faculty who did not understand the predatory nature of this business wrong turn and who relied on the claimed (fabricated) impact factors for their academic promotion. At least 1 scientist purposefully created a scam manuscript to expose the predatory nature of a target journal and then published on the experience.

The publishing industry is aware of this predatory wrong turn and is seeking to counter this by making authors aware of this risk to their efforts to share research findings in a trustworthy manner. A now quite notable Web site (http://scholarlyoa.com/2014/01/02/list-of-predatory-publishers-2014/) created by Jeffrey Beall, a librarian in the University of Colorado system, includes a list of offending publishers. The 2014 list contains a total of 477 publishers and criteria for determining if a publisher and therefore its journals are predatory or not. Similar criteria and related guidance are offered by the University of Manchester Library (http://www.openaccess.manchester.ac.uk/ checkjournal/predatoryjournals/). The editorial staff and editorial board for Cancer Nursing recognize the essentialness of trustworthy research processes and trustworthy sharing of findings in a timely manner. We urge authors and readers to be mindful of the risks of publishing in predatory journals and to carefully protect research and its ability to improve cancer care by scrutinizing journals for their legitimacy prior to submitting research papers to them.

My very best to you.
References