

## Caveat scriptor

In 2012, the *Saudi Journal of Anaesthesia* retracted a paper for plagiarism.<sup>[1]</sup> That retraction was accompanied by an editorial<sup>[2]</sup> entitled “Caveat Lector” in which Eldawlatly and Shafer exhorted readers to beware, presumably intending that readers of the scientific literature should be aware of the possibility that the content might be fictitious or otherwise affected by some form of misconduct.

*Caveat lector.* Readers should indeed be aware of the many potential shortcomings of the scientific literature, and thus always read with a critical eye, but one might well question how a reader is to know when the data or words published by journals, usually in good faith, might be corrupt. If the work has been carefully reviewed, usually by people with expertise in the field, and also passed fit for publication by editors and subeditorial staff, then the readers could certainly be forgiven for presuming the work is legitimate.

*Caveat editor.* Perhaps Eldawlatly’s and Shafer’s editorial<sup>[2]</sup> would better have been entitled thus – let the *editor* beware. Editors, and the reviewers who help them, do act as the gatekeepers of the scientific literature to a large extent, and readers have little choice but to rely heavily on them to ensure the published material is of a high standard in all respects. But readers must also beware that editorial staff face a difficult task when it comes to recognizing and dealing with submissions that are less than completely legitimate. Editors, like readers, tread a fine line between trust and suspicion – getting it wrong has significant consequences for all concerned so the default position has to be trust, and indeed authors should be entitled to that, but the few that choose to misrepresent the truth undermine that faith.

We have had tools to check for plagiarism for some time and more recently for image manipulation but these are far from perfect, rely heavily on human interpretation and can potentially be circumvented. Mechanisms to detect such things as statistical anomalies<sup>[3]</sup> and faulty gene constructs<sup>[4]</sup> have also been devised but, again, these currently require expert human interpretation for even basic reliability. When questions of suspected misconduct arise, authors and their institutions can be far from helpful, making the editors’ roles even more difficult, but journals can and should make more effort to both prevent the

publication of problematic material and promptly correct it when it has been discovered after publication.

Nevertheless, aided by ongoing improvements in the tools available, and increasingly aware of the potential problems in submitted manuscripts, editors and publishers are getting better at discovery during the assessment process, thus preventing publication of bad science at least some of the time. Moreover, a growing number of individuals and groups dedicated to cleaning up the scientific literature, sometimes known as “scientific sleuths” and “data thugs,” are bringing to light problematic material that has already been published.<sup>[5]</sup>

In this issue of the *Saudi Journal of Anaesthesia* readers will, unfortunately, find yet another retraction.<sup>[6]</sup> This came about because the paper in question was incorporated into a meta-analysis submitted to another journal. The editor of that journal, with some experience in this area, noticed several anomalies, including the fact that the data in two of the papers included in the meta-analysis were near identical in many respects. The outcome was twofold – the meta-analysis, the result of a lot of very hard work, had to be rejected for publication because at least some of the papers on which it was based were shown to be unreliable; and then the editors of both journals which published the papers with overlapping data had to be notified. Twofold, also, is the consequent exhortation...

*Caveat scriptor.* This applies first to the writers of meta-analyses. These reviews often involve considerable effort, effort that might well be wasted if the review is unpublishable or, worse, potentially retracted or corrected after publication as a result of the inclusion of unrecognized fraudulent data from other sources. Writers of literature reviews and meta-analyses must take great care to critically evaluate the veracity of the data they incorporate.

But, more importantly, authors who have already published or who are intending to submit manuscripts containing fraudulent or falsified data, words that are not their own or have been inappropriately reused, or some other problem that falls into the broad classification of misconduct, need to understand that they run a very real and ever-increasing risk of being caught. The consequences in such cases can be severe – reputations, finances, personal liberty,<sup>[7]</sup> and even, it now appears, lives<sup>[8]</sup> have been lost.

Caveat lector. Caveat editor. Caveat *scriptor*.

Let the *writer* beware!


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