

Commentary: Publish or perish – Musings of a young faculty

“An academic career in which a person is forced to produce scientific writings in great amounts creates a danger of intellectual superficiality” – Albert Einstein^[1]

“Publish or perish” is a phrase we so commonly encounter in the scientific world these days. From young researchers to established experts in the field, the publication metrics are the most important determinant of their progress/prowess in their respective fields. The original idea of scientific publication was to make the rest of the world wiser with your novel findings in a particular disease. Every publication was meant to answer a pertinent research question and generate a few more for further research. However, the pressures of “publish or perish” have transformed this into a never-ending “rat race” of publication metrics rather than quality research.

This idea takes a whole new meaning for a resident who is just stepping into the field and still trying to learn the basics. A year into the course, he/she starts hearing from his/her peers about the need for publications to strengthen his/her curriculum vitae. This is vital not only for admission into a fellowship course on completion of the residency but also for a job application in any reputed academic institution later on. Unfortunately for young-career clinician-scientists, the only quantifiable metric looked for in job interviews is the number of publications in peer-reviewed journals as the citation-based metrics like the Hirsch index and others take time to build up. Hence starts the numbers game. This is where predatory journals swoop in and target the novice researcher. They tempt them with early and easy publication timelines with often concealed publication charges. Already searching for quick publications, the novice researcher falls prey to their fancy emails, which are often dotted with undue adulations.^[2]

There are many perils the publish or perish system brings along. Researchers often tend to favor quantity over quality. Guest and ghost authors have become the norm in between the first and the corresponding author.^[3] Hyperprolific authors

are on the rise, with some publishing a paper every 5 days! More than 50% of such authors are in the field of medicine.^[4] Large datasets are “salami-sliced” into multiple publications to increase the numbers at the cost of one impactful publication. Journal editors also recognize this trend with the term “least publishable unit” – the smallest amount of information that can make a paper publishable in a peer-reviewed journal.^[5] This leads to an increase in the number of publications, but the new information added by this data is disproportionately less. Scientific fields with too many publications can become sluggish to innovations and findings as these papers tend to get lost in the sea of data.^[6] Publish or perish also encourages problematic research practices, leading to an increase in incidences of plagiarism, academic fraud, and retractions. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is the perfect example of this, where over 1,00,000 publications came out in peer-reviewed journals within the first year of the pandemic and over five dozen of them were retracted, including some from reputed journals like the New England Journal of Medicine and the Lancet.^[7] Lastly, the pressures of publications often tend to destroy the “work-life balance,” with researchers prioritizing writing research proposals and often carrying their work home, leading to less family time and destroying the overall peace of mind.^[8]

The solution to the problem lies within the system. Peter Higgs, the famous British physicist and 2013 Physics Nobel Laureate of “Higgs Boson” fame, admitted that there is no way he could have done his 1964 discovery in today’s academic climate and that no university would employ him as he would not be considered “productive enough” due to the lack of numbers in publication.^[9] Academic institutions have to develop protocols to promote quality over quantity in research.^[10] The evaluation of the research of a particular faculty member for recruitment or promotion should be goal-oriented and not solely based on publication metrics. The goals should be clearly defined at the start of the evaluation period and the periodic review should evaluate the progress made toward achieving those goals rather than the number of publications generated during that period. Young researchers should also be encouraged to identify a problem area under the mentorship

of senior faculty and work toward solving those dilemmas. It is high time that we as an academic community stem this rat race and get the focus back where it should be – **quality research!**

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my mentors at the Advanced Eye Centre, Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh, India (*Prof. Amod Gupta, Prof. Jagat Ram, Prof. Mangat Dogra, Prof. Surinder Pandav, Prof. Vishali Gupta, Prof. Sushmita Kaushik, Prof. Ramandeep Singh, Dr. Faisal TT, Dr. Mohit Dogra, and Dr. Savleen Kaur*) who inculcated the right attitude of research in me during my formative years.

Simar R Singh

Department of Ophthalmology, Advanced Eye Centre,
Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and
Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, India

Correspondence to: Dr. Simar R Singh,
Assistant Professor, Vitreo-Retina Services, Advanced Eye
Centre, Department of Ophthalmology, Post Graduate Institute
of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh - 160 012, India.
E-mail: simarrajansingh@gmail.com

References

1. Isaacson W. Einstein (His Life and Universe). 1st ed. New York: Simon and Schuster; 2008. p. 79.
2. Gurnani B, Kaur K. Avoiding predatory publishing for early-career ophthalmologists. *Indian J Ophthalmol* 2021;69:3719-25.
3. Gupta A. On credit and credibility: Guest authors, ghostwriters, and everyone else in between. *Indian J Ophthalmol* 2021;69:3-4.
4. Ioannidis JPA, Klavans R, Boyack KW. Thousands of scientists publish a paper every five days. *Nature* 2018;561:167-9.
5. Dupps WJ Jr, Randleman JB. The perils of the least publishable unit. *J Cataract Refract Surg* 2012;38:1517-8.
6. Chu JSG, Evans J. Too Many Papers? Slowed Canonical Progress in Large Fields of Science. doi: 10.31235/osc.io/jk63c.
7. Anderson C, Nugent K, Peterson C. Academic journal retractions and the COVID-19 pandemic. *J Prim Care Community Health* 2021;12:21501327211015592. doi: 10.1177/21501327211015592.
8. Bartlett MJ, Arslan FN, Bankston A, Sarabipour S. Ten simple rules to improve academic work-life balance. *PLoS Comput Biol* 2021;17:e1009124.
9. Aitkenhead D. December 6, 2013 "Peter Higgs: I wouldn't be productive enough for today's academic system," *Guardian*. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/dec/06/peter-higgs-boson-academic-system>.
10. Honavar SG. Understanding author scientometrics – How tall is tall? *Indian J Ophthalmol* 2021;69:1-2.

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

Access this article online	
Quick Response Code:	Website: www.ijo.in
	DOI: 10.4103/ijo.IJO_2511_21

Cite this article as: Singh SR. Commentary: Publish or perish – Musings of a young faculty. *Indian J Ophthalmol* 2021;69:3725-6.