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Managing publication errors: a perspective from a small scholarly journal

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“Honorable errors do not count as failures in science, but as seeds for progress in the quintessential activity of correction.” *Stephen Jay Gould*

In the February issue of *European Science Editing*, Cagney *et al* described an innovative approach to retraction and republication and reported two case studies of its implementation.¹ We in the *Croatian Medical Journal* (www.cmj.hr) find this article to be highly motivating, as it offers new perspectives on this important, yet frequently ignored topic. Apart from defining the problems that arise in the retraction process, as seen from the scientific journal editors' perspective, the authors provide practical solutions and discuss potential obstacles that small journals might face when implementing such policies.

When it comes to retractions, it is quite clear that no one likes them. However, they are the journal's only available mechanism of self-correction. This notion might seem elegant, but is burdened by a lack of certainty and precision, as the concept of retraction may encompass a number of different practices. Reasons for retractions fall within two major groups, scientific misconduct and honest errors, and there are strong arguments in favour of distinct solutions for different errors² namely that if the same strategies are used to handle both scientific misconduct and unintentional error, the results might be ineffective, if not counterproductive.² In 2009, COPE published retraction guidelines, in which they drew distinctions between retractions, corrections and expressions of concern, and provided practical solutions for retractions in a step-by-step manner.³ Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of journals still do not have a retraction policy, although this number is much lower compared to previous years.³ What calls for a debate on retractions and its practical solutions is the exponential rise in the number of publications in the recent years, followed by a rise in the number of retractions.⁴

We see the recently reported policy by Cagney *et al* as an important step towards transparency in the retraction process, which enables all shareholders in the scientific communication to more easily identify the reasons for rejection and appreciate the role of editors in the retraction and republication process, thus reinforcing the self-correcting aspect of the process. As a small journal with limited resources and with much of our work done by voluntary academic editors, implementing this novel practice seems challenging. Nevertheless, we believe it is worth the effort, as the practice is valuable and consistent with our vision set out by the editors in the early years, namely, to be author friendly and fulfil the role of educators. A novel, more transparent, retraction policy might also serve an educational purpose. Moreover, as small journals are a common entry level for young authors, transparency in retraction policies might help them cope with bigger future challenges. We believe that this novelty will help us in striving to adapt to the ever changing science communication environment, to be in step with the big journals, and offer our own innovative solutions.

References

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