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'Retraction Watch's' Ivan Oransky on Reigning in Academic Publishing's 'Wild West'

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Cases of research fraud have generated high profile coverage in recent years, contributing to a sense that misconduct is rife in scientific fields. Much attention has recently focused on retraction, when an academic journal withdraws a paper from publication because it no longer believes the data and conclusions can serve as a foundation for future research.

As editor and co-founder of the site Retraction Watch, Ivan Oransky, MD, who is also a clinical assistant professor at NYU School of Medicine, has been following retraction—what he calls “the ‘nuclear option’ in self-correction”—for years. At a talk sponsored by the Masters Scholars Program in Humanistic Medicine, on Tuesday, December 1, he offered perspective on why retractions happen and how “they offer a window into the scientific process.”

Retractions have shot up from 40 instances in 2001, to 400 in 2010, according to Dr. Oransky. That is a significant increase, even after adjusting for the fact that the number of papers published over this period has risen as well. Two-thirds of retractions are due to misconduct owing to fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, he said.



Retractions in scientific publishing have risen dramatically, Dr. Oransky pointed out in his talk.

“I don’t want to make it sound like this epidemic thing is happening, but clearly retractions are on the rise,” said Dr. Oransky, who is also vice president and global editor of MedPage Today and a distinguished writer in residence at the NYU Arthur Carter Journalism Institute.

Peer Review, or Self Review?

Dr. Oransky relayed one of his favorite retraction stories, that of Hyung-in Moon, PhD, a botanist in South Korea. Dr. Moon submitted a paper to a journal that asked him to recommend peer reviewers. Rather than suggesting real people in his field, Dr. Moon created email addresses for fake reviewers and eventually “managed to peer review 28 of his own papers,” Dr. Oransky related. The reviews, he continued, were “not just positive reviews, they were actually well done reviews. In other words, who knows Hyung-in Moon’s work better than Hyung-in Moon?” But Dr. Moon’s cover was blown when the editors received the peer reviews within 24 hours of requesting them.

“Whenever I tell that story in front of a group of scientists, they laugh,” said Dr. Oransky. “I don’t even have to say why that it so ridiculous. It is obviously ridiculous because it normally takes much longer than that to beg people to actually review.”

Technology’s Double-Edge Sword

In fact, "there is at best circumstantial evidence" that fraud has increased, according to Dr. Oransky. Instead, he theorizes that people have simply become better at catching fraud. The double-edged sword of technology is that on the one hand, it is easier to commit fraud. A scientist could, for instance, create an email address for fake peer reviewers, or take advantage of the many new journals that have popped up in the online era—some of them "pay-for-publication" journals which are eager to accept papers. On the other hand, software to detect plagiarism is now widely deployed, and online publishing has increased the number of eyeballs on a paper, said Dr. Oransky.



Dr. Oransky greeted attendees after his presentation at Schwartz Lecture Hall E on the main campus.

Retractions happen more often in high impact journals, which Dr. Oransky speculates is a result of the "huge incentive" to get published in these venues. "In order to get into these journals, you are going to push the envelope a bit," he said. "For most people maybe that means pushing it in ways that are entirely kosher. For some people that means pushing it in ways that aren't."

Additionally, men are much more likely to be responsible for a retracted paper than women, even after accounting for the imbalance between men and women in science. On Retraction Watch's leaderboard of the top 30 retractors in science, there are only 2 women.

Finding New Ways to Beat Fraud

A less appreciated problem is that a lot of retracted studies continue to be cited even after they are retracted, according to Dr. Oransky. "You know what would happen if you were a lawyer . . . and you cited a case that was overturned?" he asked. "If you knowingly did that, you could be disbarred."

One reason this happens is people don't know about retractions; one-third of the time, papers are not even marked as retracted. Additionally, retraction notices from journals can be "opaque or misleading," Dr. Oransky said. Words or phrases taken from actual notices include: "significant originality issue," and "inadequate procedural or methodological practices of citation and quotation," causing an "unacceptable level of text parallels."

To make it "impossible" for researchers to cite retracted studies, Dr. Oransky and his Retraction Watch co-founder Adam Marcus are creating an open-access database of all retractions in partnership with the Center for Open Science at University of Virginia, funded by a grant from the Arnold Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation. Another vehicle for post-publication peer review is a controversial website called PubPeer, which allows scientists to anonymously comment on papers after they have been published.

Dr. Oransky also discussed the issue of reproducibility—whether a scientific study can be duplicated—which, he said, is "a much bigger issue" than retraction. Studies of experiments in cancer research and psychology have found widespread inability to replicate study results. One analysis has found that in the U.S., \$28 billion is spent on preclinical research that is not reproducible, out of \$100 billion spent on research by public and private sources overall. Dr. Oransky and Marcus have suggested earmarking money for reproducibility studies.

While no scientist likes to retract a paper, it is a fundamental part of the scientific process. And it may actually pay off if done voluntarily. Dr. Oransky cited a study that finds that scientific authors who report their own errors see an increase in citations of their work. "Doing the right thing," he said "actually does pay."

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