



# PUBLICATION TRUTHS

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF WILFRED PEH

Following an article published in *Global Research* (<http://goo.gl/wMWv7J>) stating a few editors-in-chief's opinion that many published research may be unreliable or even outright false, *SMA News* invites Prof Wilfred Peh to shed some light on the situation and to offer readers his advice and opinion on this pertinent issue.

Prof Wilfred CG Peh is the former editor of the *Proceedings of Singapore Healthcare* and founding editor of the *Hong Kong Journal of Radiology*. He is currently senior editor of the *British Journal of Radiology* and serves on several publications' editorial boards including the *American Journal of Roentgenology*, *American Journal of Orthopaedics* and *Seminars in Musculoskeletal Radiology*. Besides being the former editor of the *Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ)*, Prof Peh continues to serve as an honorary advisor to the editorial board of the *SMJ*.

On top of his many editorial positions, Prof Peh has 350 publications in journals listed in PubMed and has authored more than 50 book chapters. His seventh book titled *Effective Medical Writing. The Write Way to Get Published* was recently published and launched on 1 June 2016.



**Prof Wilfred Peh (WP)** is senior consultant and head, Department of Diagnostic Radiology, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, and clinical professor at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

## RELIABILITY OF PUBLICATIONS

Prof Peh, what is your take on the opinion of unreliable and false published research expressed in the *Global Research* article?

**WP:** There is some truth in the views expressed in said article. Not all you read is true and reliable, even in the "best" journals; and the situation is made worse when selected snippets of information are sensationalised (and often taken out of context) in newspapers, magazines and social media.

Are we beset by the same problems of industry getting involved in our research?

**WP:** I do not think the situation locally has reached the extent found in many centres in other countries. However, I believe that these problems will continue to emerge and progress over time.

Have you encountered local research articles that were plagiarised or contained falsified data in your experience with the *SMJ*? How was it handled?

**WP:** When I edited the *SMJ*, there were several episodes of plagiarised and duplicated submissions – all of which involved foreign authors. They were dealt with according to the *SMJ* policy which I had introduced (see Further Readings for editorials on duplicate publication and plagiarism published in the *SMJ*).

I did not encounter any instances of intentional gross misconduct, such as plagiarism or data falsification, from local researchers. Although some minor infringements were detected, they were mainly attributable to the prevailing "cut and paste" culture – simply bad habits, laziness or plain ignorance on the part of some young doctors and researchers.

## THE PURPOSE OF PUBLICATIONS

What is your opinion on the pressure of needing publications for trainees/

promotion requirement? Do you think that this "obligation" is still applicable and necessary in the current system?

**WP:** I am a strong supporter of doctors doing research and getting published. Nothing beats the exercise and inherent training entailed in doing a thorough literature search; conducting a research project; analysing and discussing the findings and its implications for patient care; and repeatedly revising the manuscript until it is suitable for publication.

Even if the young doctor does not embark upon an academic career, the resultant training and discipline in getting published will stand the doctor in good stead when he or she is faced with evaluating published work. He or she should be better positioned to critically analyse the work of others, rather than just accept all that he or she reads at face value. This will help doctors get around the issue of unreliable or problematic articles found in the scientific literature.

What is your advice on selecting research projects for young doctors such that it inspires them to do research?

**WP:** Find a good mentor: someone who has a successful track record of research and publication and, most importantly, is willing to inspire and guide young doctors.

Young doctors who are just starting off should ideally be "hungry" and motivated. They cannot expect a cutting-edge research project to be handed to them at first go. They will need to sacrifice time, even nights and weekends, to work on whatever they can get their hands on. Typically, case reports, case series and retrospective studies are good starting points and there is absolutely nothing wrong with them. After all, having a few such publications under one's belt is better than having none at all!

I will also advise seeking out and enrolling in medical writing workshops where the basic "nuts and bolts" of how to construct a scientific manuscript and issues

relating to submission and publication can be learnt in a fairly painless manner.

## THE PUBLICATION PROCESS

What is the process of having an article published? How is the accuracy of data checked? Could you provide some tips for our discerning readers?

**WP:** Editors are heavily dependent on the judgement and opinions of peer reviewers, especially in general medical journals where many submitted manuscripts are outside the expertise of the editor. Editors value their star reviewers and many try to find innovative ways to reward these exceptional reviewers.

However, it is a good practice for editors to read through the manuscript themselves and if there are doubts about any aspect of the work submitted, including data accuracy, then there is always the option of sending the manuscript to additional reviewers for their opinions. Unfortunately, there is no perfect formula and much is down to the dedication, experience and judgement of the editor who, like the reviewer, is often an unpaid volunteer with many other clinical and academic commitments.

What is your opinion on journals that require authors to pay for the reviewing of their article?

**WP:** Personally, I am not in favour of it, nor am I in favour of paying for manuscript submissions or paying for expedited publication of articles. However, I guess that there are different business models in the running of journals and journals too need to keep themselves afloat. Call me old-fashioned, but I feel that all submitted manuscripts should be judged solely on merit, regardless of where they originate from, who they are written by, and the authors' ability or inability to pay. ♦

### Further readings

1. Duplicate publication: a joint statement from the Singapore Medical Journal and the Medical Journal of Malaysia. *SMJ* 2007; 48:1067-8.
2. Plagiarism: a joint statement from the Singapore Medical Journal and the Medical Journal of Malaysia. *SMJ* 2008; 49:965-6.