

Planes, trams and auditoriums: beware predatory conferencing

BY ROD MCNEIL

Predatory conferences are a growing concern. First highlighted in our sister magazine, *Eye News**, the issue affects all areas of medicine – including ENT and audiology.

With inboxes filling up with flattering invitations to ‘global’ meetings in glamorous destinations, it’s getting harder to tell the genuine from the bogus. Here’s what you need to know to avoid being caught out.

Predatory open-access journals and predatory conferences are considered the two main areas of predatory infiltration in academic medicine that are of growing concern [1–7]. Unsolicited publishing requests from potentially predatory publishers occur frequently among faculty in ophthalmology [8], and similar experiences are reported across other medical specialties. Predatory conferencing also represents an increasing menace and distraction, underscoring the need for guidance and vigilance on distinguishing between the trusted, scholarly research conference and the misleading or bogus event [4]. However, many researchers and clinicians appear unaware of the need to consider the authenticity or legitimacy of a journal or conference [1].

A recent editorial in *Nature* noted that predatory conferences “exist to extract money from researchers, with little or nothing in the way of academic return” [5]. Respected medical practitioners, scientists and clinical investigators are accustomed to receiving streams of unsolicited invitations to speak at international conferences held in attractive, city-break destinations, often in fields or specialties unrelated to their interests or expertise.

Predatory conferences in academic medicine are most often put together by for-profit companies, designed as a vehicle to recruit clinicians, scientists and researchers for financial gain through registration / presentation fees and binding publication in predatory journals [4]. Such meetings are labelled ‘predatory’ because of their failure to act with integrity and transparency; often, there is little emphasis on the quality or rigour of abstracts accepted or the invited speakers [4].

According to the InterAcademy Partnership (IAP), a global network of more than 140 scientific academies, the term ‘predatory’ is typically used in the literature for the illegal, deceitful end of the spectra of behaviours,



Photo: Rod McNeil.

and such journals and conferences should be avoided [1]. At the other end of the spectrum, there may be legitimate journals and conferences with practices that lack the expected academic rigour or editorial control and fall short of common ethical practices, threatening to weaken research integrity [1]. The stuff in between “should be navigated with caution” and not go unchallenged [1]. All are ‘predatory’ to varying degrees, according to IAP (Figure 1).

These so-called ‘fake’ conferences mostly target unsuspecting early-career researchers and young clinicians [7]. The author(s) of the *Nature* editorial recommended that senior researchers and supervisors should advise their early-career colleagues about which conferences are genuinely useful (organisers of predatory meetings target established researchers, as well as journal editors, with flattering invitations to give keynote lectures, partly to attract more junior colleagues) [5]. Wider and regular publication of good conference practices by research communities was also encouraged [5].

Growing risks across the medical research community

A report by the IAP in 2022 alerted the medical research community to the

growing risks of predatory journals and conferences, and to their damaging impacts if left unchallenged [1]. An IAP survey of 1800 researchers from across all disciplines revealed that close to one quarter of respondents may have already used predatory journals or conferences [1]. Potential infiltration of predatory journals and conferences in the medical research community risks undermining the integrity of medical and clinical research, warns IAP. Falling victim to predatory approaches may also damage the external reputation of the authors, the speaker and their institutions, and heighten concerns about the legitimacy of the research [7].

Three systemic factors allow predatory practices and behaviours to flourish, according to IAP: monetisation and commercialisation of academic research output, including the author-pays model of Open Access; research assessment / evaluation – the metrics by which research is evaluated and careers are shaped, together with journal and institutional ranking; and challenges and deficiencies in the peer-review system, notably the lack of transparency and the lack of training (on good practice), capacity and recognition of peer reviewers [1,9].

Determining the legitimacy of a conference:

Think. Check. Attend.

Consultancy group Knowledge E developed the ‘Think. Check. Attend.’ initiative to assist researchers and scholars in judging the legitimacy and academic credentials of conferences in deciding whether to participate or not, providing a useful common-sense checklist for the would-be presenter or conference attendee [10,11]. Prospective attendees should also check that the conference venue and location are appropriate; if not, all other questions may

be redundant. Clinicians are encouraged to review the principal mission statement and programme objectives, panellist biographies and the planned programme. A review of accepted paper and poster abstracts, often available on the online meeting guide, will provide an indication of academic quality and rigour of the proposed proceedings, as well as editorial and scientific research standards. Check out the media partners, if any, and whether members of the medical press are welcome; the latter an encouraging sign of a commitment to keeping the wider professional community up to date.

Countermeasures

Countermeasures frequently recommended for dealing with predatory conferences are increasing education and awareness, emphasising responsibilities of universities and funders, and publishing lists of predatory publishers associated with conferences [6]. In a call to action to multiple stakeholders [1], the IAP recommends five key measures:

- Raise awareness of predatory practices and threat posed to science and society.
- Avoid engaging with, and legitimising, so-called predatory journals, publishers and conferences and promote good practice in publishing and conferencing choices.
- Work collaboratively on efforts to reduce the commercialisation and monetisation of academia; promote open science and a move towards diamond open access (i.e. no fees payable by authors or readers) or other such non-commercial models.
- Reject the overuse and reliance on quantitative metrics in research evaluation (including using quantitative metrics more

rationally and intelligently) and promote ways of recognising research quality.

- Strengthen the institution of transparent peer review in academia, through merit systems, policies and support structures at all levels.

According to Godsken, et al. the number of predatory conferences has increased worldwide and, reportedly, they are becoming more sophisticated in concealing their nature as for-profit businesses with little or no regard for academic values [6]. They often spam researchers with unsolicited email invitations, excessively praising the researcher's latest published paper and invite them to share their knowledge with a global audience, backed by the offer of a generous discount incentive policy.

Conference Series LLC Ltd was recently promoting a two-day meeting titled 19th International Conference on Ophthalmology and Vision Science, to be held in Rome, Italy, in mid-December 2024. The online programme, accessed late October 2024, featured a photograph of the Rome Colosseum but not much else. It did state that attendees will include industry professionals as well as top academic medical institutions, orthoptists, researchers and academics. The authorisation policy upon registration stated that the conference organiser holds all rights to publish or reproduce resulting images and materials in publications or any other form worldwide without compensation. The advertised faculty of renowned international speakers, with accompanying headshots, included two highly regarded consultant ophthalmologists from respected UK institutions. The author contacted one of the named UK speakers to enquire further, who

responded by confirming they were unaware of the upcoming Rome conference, had not attended any of their previous meetings, and expressed gratitude for being alerted to "this scam."

Another UK consultant ophthalmologist (and professor of ophthalmology) commented on condition of anonymity: "Having been on the receiving end of predatory conference organisations, my advice is to use common sense and just be extra cautious of any conferences that are not well known."

Predatory infiltration in academic medicine: how do you avoid being duped?

Interview with Sophie J Bakri, MD

Sophie J Bakri is Professor and Chair of Ophthalmology at the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, US. Professor Bakri was Program Director alongside Barbara Ann Blodi of this year's Retina Subspecialty Day meeting at the American Academy of Ophthalmology annual meeting, held in Chicago, Illinois, US, in October 2024. In an interview with author Rod McNeil, Prof Bakri discusses direct experience of predatory behaviours and offers practical tips on how to approach predatory conferencing.

"With predatory publishing, you often receive offers to write in a journal: sometimes they will tell you it is quick peer review, that it will cost money to publish, and sometimes they say they will waive the publication fee or give you a discount. Essentially you are paying them to publish something. You may also find that a predatory journal may have put your name on the editorial board

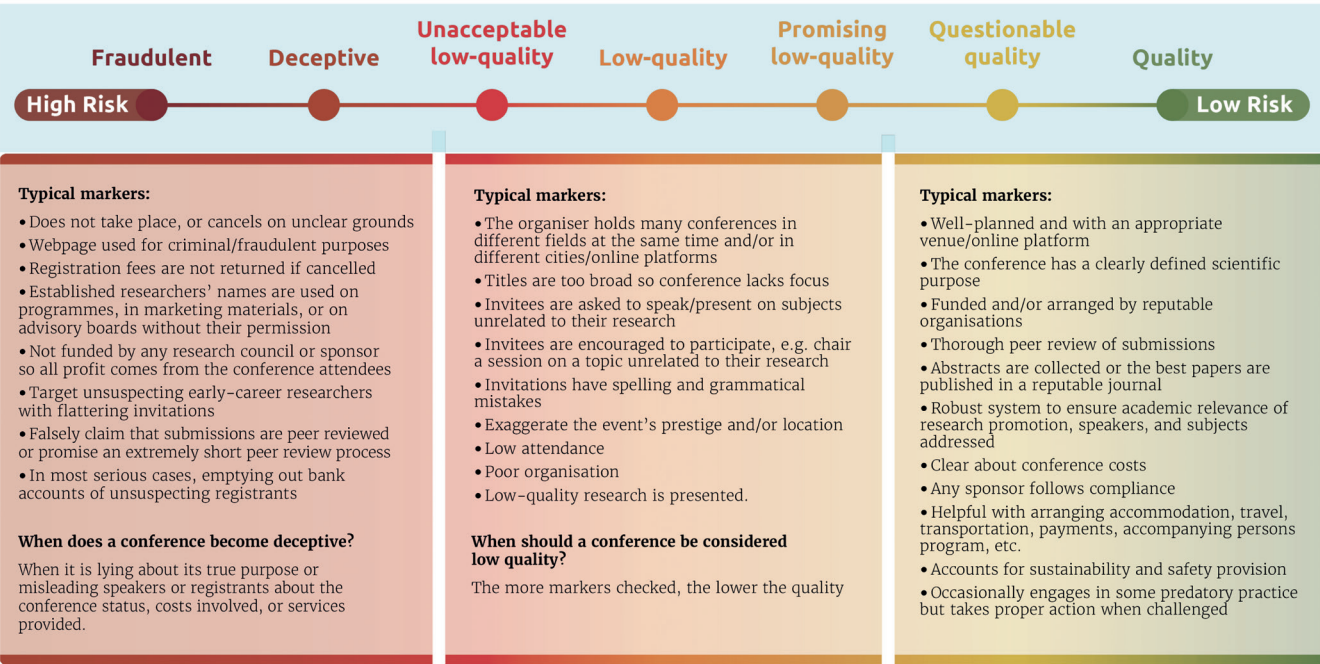


Figure 1: Adapted from: The InterAcademy Partnership. Combating predatory academic journals and conferences. March 2022. <https://www.interacademies.org/publication/predatory-practices-report-English>. This work is copyright of the InterAcademy Partnership (IAP) and is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

without your knowledge. Unfortunately, they are publishing material that is often not peer reviewed, however you may find it even listed on PubMed Central (PMC) but it will not likely merit a citation on the PubMed database.

"Predatory conference invitations often span multiple different specialties or areas unrelated to your specialty or practice, with meetings often scheduled monthly and in different locations worldwide. 'Come to Paris, you are invited, sorry we can't pay your air fare or hotel expenses but would love to have you speak and it's only \$2,000 to register but it's a global conference,' for example. Predatory conference organisers typically charge high fees and the meetings are often very low quality. If you did attend, you may show up in the room, if there is a room, to find two people present, for example.

"Predatory journals and predatory conference organisers prey on people, particularly people that are not well known who are trying to build their career, and people who may be enticed by the opportunity to attend or present at an international or global conference. Established scientists and investigators are also prime targets. The recipient receives flattering AI-generated invitations, such as 'your perspectives on X align perfectly with the themes of the conference [...] we believe your contribution would greatly enrich the conference program and contribute to the overall success of the event.'

"We need to protect people from predatory behaviour, especially early-career practitioners who are likely going to receive such invitations to present their research at so-called 'prestigious' meetings put together by for-profit conference organisers."

Prospective attendees need to verify that conferences are legitimate, establish if there are any affiliations with scientific organisations, and review who is running the conference. Practitioners should check the conference agenda and scheduled speakers and try to find out about the peer-review process. "Often when I am invited to conferences, I will look back and check on previous speakers and check if there is anything online about the conference, for example whether any well-regarded trade journals picked it up," added Prof Bakri. "And it's always a good idea to try to find out if anyone you know has been to a previous conference from the same event organiser."

"Sometimes little-known conferences are real and legitimate, but they may be early and they are starting out," Prof Bakri explained. "But these typically involve an affiliation with a scientific organisation or may involve practitioners in private practice. There may be some noteworthy conferences that serve a particular niche interest that may not necessarily have Continuing Medical

Education (CME) accreditation. Occasionally there may be a role for such a conference."

Prof Bakri, a retina specialist, admits to being approached regularly with speaking invitations from predatory conference organisers, including invitations this year to speak at an obstetrics and gynaecology conference in Paris, France, and another on regenerative medicine in Nagoya, Japan. "These practices dilute scientific work and misinform practitioners," Prof Bakri cautioned.

Q&A with Dr Victorien Tamègnon Dounon

Victorien Tamègnon Dounon is Associate Professor of Molecular Microbiology at the Research Unit in Applied Microbiology and Pharmacology of Natural Substances, University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin. Dr Dounon was a member of the working group behind the InterAcademy Partnership report on combatting predatory academic journals and conferences.

What can be done (by medical / healthcare professionals) to mitigate the impact of the three key systemic drivers identified in the IAP report as empowering or enabling predatory approaches?

"To mitigate the impact of systemic drivers enabling predatory practices, healthcare professionals can advocate for quality-based research assessments that prioritise research integrity over quantity, support the development of clear publishing guidelines, and promote reputable journals and conferences. They can also engage in educating peers on identifying predatory practices and use vetted tools like Think. Check. Submit. to encourage ethical publishing choices within the medical community."

Are healthcare professionals in your opinion equipped to tackle the threats posed by predatory journals and conferences?

"Healthcare professionals are not fully equipped to handle the threats posed by predatory journals and conferences, often due to time constraints, limited training in identifying predatory practices and the pressure to publish."

Any top tips for busy medical doctors planning their continuing medical education activities in a given year?

- "Prioritise accredited sources: Choose CME activities endorsed by reputable organisations, such as the American Medical Association or the European Accreditation Council for CME, to ensure quality and legitimacy.
- "Set clear learning goals: Identify specific knowledge areas or skills you want to develop at the start of the year, which will help focus your time on the most relevant and beneficial activities.

- "Use professional networks: Leverage networks like LinkedIn or ResearchGate and seek recommendations from trusted colleagues for conference suggestions, especially for newer, lesser-known events.
- "Verify conference credentials: For unfamiliar conferences, research if reputable institutions or experts are involved and look for established sponsors or past conference proceedings.
- "Consider hybrid or virtual options: When possible, attend virtual or hybrid conferences, which can save travel time and expenses while allowing access to high-quality content."

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[All links last accessed November 2024]

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