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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

What is 'Not' Research?

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Dear Editor,

This is in response to the article titled *"ManuScript Rejection sYndrome (MiSeRY): An Author's Nightmare,"* published in Volume 2, Issue 9, 2024 of *NBEJMS* [1]. First of all, I congratulate the authors for addressing such an important and often overlooked issue, particularly in the context of young medical residents who are required to publish or present scientific papers as part of their postgraduate examination requirements. The article is both timely and valuable for the journal's target audience, offering insights that will surely resonate with many aspiring authors trying to cope up with the pressures of academic publishing.

To further build on the points discussed in the aforementioned article [1], burnout has been steadily increasing among doctors, particularly residents, due to a variety of factors that complicate their lives. These include the delayed mean age at which they have steady income compared to their peers. Moreover, the prolonged pursuit of education/training, often spanning 10-15 years, which frequently comes at the expense of a social life and personal well-being adds to their troubles [2]. The repeated rejection of manuscripts by journals or abstracts by scientific committees at conferences can add significant stress, further contributing to burnout among residents and young doctors. This additional pressure exacerbates the already challenging demands of their training and professional development.

Another important question worth discussing is: What is research, and what is the purpose behind it? Research is a systematic inquiry aimed at seeking knowledge, truth, and understanding an issue/problem at hand in a methodical way. The root cause of *ManuScript Rejection sYndrome (MiSeRY)* often extends beyond the decisions of editorial teams/reviewers; it lies in a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of research and its purpose. Research is inherently iterative, leading to more questions than we begin with, and this

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process instils intellectual humility, allowing us to appreciate the little yet significant aspects of the science we pursue.

Every well-reasoned rejection following peer review provides an opportunity to improve the quality and scientific rigor of our methods, and we should appreciate the reviewers for sharing their valuable insights. The CACHE *(Cool down, Analyse the letter, Consider options and HEad on!)* approach proposed by the authors is a valuable tool for building resilience against rejection. However, plain rejections without any explanation, especially when citing a 'lack of novelty' or 'dearth of space', can be disheartening. To mitigate this, predetermined checklists can help assess the suitability of our work before submission. Many journal management systems now offer, or editorial boards mandate, pre-submission checks, such as the CARE checklist for case reports, which ensures that the work meets essential criteria [3].

In the present scenario, many manuscript rejections (excluding those from predatory journals that publish anything for a fee) occur because researchers are focused on publishing to meet external demands. Medical faculty often aim for publications to secure promotions, while postgraduates pursue them to qualify for exams. This approach, driven by the need to meet these requirements, often results in lower-quality work and a lack of genuine contribution to scientific knowledge. The idea of being a true clinician-scientist is alien to our work culture except in a few reputed institutions in our country.

I have also noticed a clear trend among medical students pursuing the USMLE pathway as International Medical Graduates (IMGs). Many of these students engage in research primarily to bolster their CVs rather than out of a genuine passion for discovery. They often target highly regarded journals to meet residency application requirements and impress selection committees, treating research as merely a stepping stone rather than a true pursuit of knowledge.

Moreover, it is disturbing to see collaborations between individuals who may live thousands of miles apart and have never participated in data collection, lab work or performed genuine statistical analysis. These individuals often become authors simply because they can buy an authorship from a set of people who excel at paraphrasing and utilizing AI tools available on the internet in 'creating manuscripts.' This practice raises questions about the authenticity and integrity of the research being published in journals which has become a launch pad for students to be identified on PubMed.

Similarly, many researchers aim to publish in high-impact, well-indexed journals simply to amass a number of papers, reducing research to a checklist item rather than a meaningful contribution to science. Another concerning trend is the rise of ghost-writing and the infiltration of the publishing industry by external agencies. Researchers, under immense pressure to publish, sometimes turn to ghostwriters or pay for pre-written papers, further diminishing the integrity of the research process. This has created an unholy nexus between academic institutions, industry publishers, and ghost-writing services. Many high-profile journals, despite their reputations, are complicit in this, allowing papers to pass through for the sake of maintaining a steady stream of submissions and revenue.

In recent years, the quality of research in the medical field has noticeably declined, marked by a rise in pseudo-research and copycat projects. Alarmingly, some high school-level work is being misrepresented as legitimate medical research. Many researchers begin with preconceived conclusions and then attempt to manipulate data to support their claims, ultimately compromising the integrity of their work. When such manuscripts land in the hands of an average reviewer, who is understandably frustrated by this toxic trend of self-deception, the decision to reject these submissions appears justified. This approach can help streamline academic publishing by promoting higher standards and encouraging genuine contributions to the field.

Research, at its core, is a means to seek knowledge, advance understanding and serve the larger society with solutions for existing problems, but for some, it has become an end in itself—a tool to achieve external rewards such as promotions, grants, or prestige. This shift has led to a rise in publications driven by the desire for personal gain rather than a genuine pursuit of scientific discovery, eroding the true value and purpose of research.

The existence of predatory publishing houses further exacerbates the problem amidst mushrooming new journals every year. These publishers accept anything for a price, flooding the academic world with low-quality research that may hold little scientific value. They prey on desperate researchers who need publications to advance their careers but lack the means or time to produce quality work. As a result, the scholarly community is saturated with publications that prioritize visibility and profit over substance.

Even systematic reviews and meta-analyses, once regarded as valuable tools for consolidating knowledge, are increasingly being reduced to repetitive exercises by some individuals. Instead of providing new insights, these researchers often recycle existing data to inflate their publication count and enhance their visibility in databases like PubMed. Such practices contribute to intellectual stagnation, where the emphasis shifts from advancing understanding to merely creating a façade of productivity.

When research questions are framed by individuals with sufficient experience in a field, they tend to be relevant to pressing issues. However, when imposters frame illusory pseudo-research questions for doing systematic reviews/meta-analysis, the result is often a collection of useless information that either gathers dust on a desk or remains in the lab without ever translating into practical applications. This disconnect not only undermines the value of research but also hampers genuine progress in the field.

This manuscript rejection syndrome, while frustrating, serves as a valuable reminder to reflect on the true purpose of publishing with each rejection we encounter. I have personally felt the sting of rejection from prestigious journals, which has compelled me to reevaluate my motivations and consider the broader challenges within the publishing industry. It’s clear that sometimes it is the quality of my work that comes under scrutiny, rather than my capabilities as a researcher.

After reading this perspective article on manuscript rejection syndrome, I must admit that this is the first time I have encountered such a comprehensive discussion on this subject. It reinforces my belief that high impact factors and journal

indexation are primarily meant to enhance the visibility of a researcher's high-quality work, rather than being used to merely inflate the profile of an individual researcher.

It has also become a trend for researchers to focus on popular or fashionable topics that are likely to attract global attention, rather than pursuing subjects that hold deeper personal or scientific meaning for them which is another often-unaddressed source for rejection owing to high volume of publication in that arena. This is often done in the pursuit of popularity or recognition, rather than contributing meaningful advancements to their field.

The h-index of authors, journal impact factor, citation scores, journal rankings, grant funding, patents, altmetrics, and recognitions like the *"world's top 2 percent researchers"* list all come with their own advantages and disadvantages in methodology. These shortcomings deserve discussion in medical schools to help students avoid losing sight of what truly matters. While these metrics may indicate a researcher's "price" or perceived net worth, the true value of a researcher lies in their originality, innovation, curiosity for discovery, impact on society or their specific field, integrity and ethical conduct, focus on quality over quantity of publications, adaptability, and mentorship, among other essential qualities.

In addition, with the rise of AI writing tools, the publishing industry is poised to face an influx of AI-generated papers that will require stringent checks for quality and purpose. One of the major challenges in scientific publishing today is balancing the demand for faster publication with the risk of higher error and retraction rates. This rush could potentially lead to an increase in retracted papers.

Recently, I encountered a situation where a reviewer uploaded my manuscript to ChatGPT for evaluation and then simply forwarded the AI-generated response back to me. This raises serious concerns about the review process and the responsible use of AI in academic publishing.

The most puzzling aspect of this whole publishing process is the increasing expectation for researchers to pay for publication (to make it open access), even after spending years toiling over their work. The commercialization of scientific publishing has led to a situation where large groups of industry publishers are dictating what gets published, and by extension, what constitutes valuable science. This growing power dynamic raises the question of whether science is being shaped by researchers or by those who control the gates of publication [4]. I don't want to delve into all the issues that plague research and development industry and intellectual property rights here.

It's important to recognize that significant breakthroughs in research don't happen overnight. Scientific progress is often incremental and rarely phenomenal, with each generation building on the work of those before them. Many researchers contribute valuable insights and advancements, yet their efforts often go unnoticed, overshadowed by those seeking credit or attention. True progress in science involves passing the torch to the next generation, knowing that even small contributions play a crucial role in the larger journey of scientific discovery.

In conclusion, I believe it is essential to emphasize the true purpose of research to residents, particularly by exploring how significant breakthroughs in

their respective fields have occurred. Understanding the current trends and approaches to tackling existing problems is crucial. Residents should be encouraged to choose challenging dissertation topics rather than simply repeating or redoing their seniors' work. This shift will serve as a vital first step in grasping what true research entails. I believe this is precisely why dissertation work has been integrated into postgraduate training.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declares that they do not have conflict of interest.

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