



Questioning editors who blame COVID-19 for their editorial failures

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to appreciate how delays in medical treatments can negatively impact the healthcare of patients in need. However, not much – if anything – has been researched on how the pandemic has been used as an excuse within professional settings. In this letter, I take note of a personal case in which an editor of a ranked and indexed medical journal, having taken four months to issue a desk rejection, promptly blamed Covid-19 for the journal's editorial failures, without providing proof of this claim. Currently, editors who issue such statements cannot be held accountable, and the system of publication needs to change in order to prevent editors from making such ludicrous claims without publicly verifiable evidence. Absent concrete measures to safe-guard authors' rights to know why their papers' intellect has been held up for so long, they become victims of a system that offers unprecedented unchecked powers to editors.

Key words: editorial irresponsibility; honesty; predatory publishing; scientific ethos; truth

Dear Journal of Clinical Medicine of Kazakhstan Editors,

One of the most commonly observed secondary consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, at its height, were delays in medical treatments, including valid reasons and excuses to blame COVID-19 for inefficiencies and delays[1], but beyond healthcare settings, the use of COVID-19 as an invalid “excuse” does not appear to have been studied extensively.

A submission by the author to an indexed healthcare journal (*Health Care Analysis*) published by Springer Nature was met with a desk rejection after waiting more than 4 months. In that period of time, the competitive advantage of the work was reduced. An apology was offered, accompanied by an odd reason: “Apologies for the delay, our editorial processes and response time continues to be impacted as a result of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.” In other words, even though authors are victimized by editorial inefficiency, there are absolutely no negative consequences for the editor, journal or publisher, reputational or otherwise. This is completely incorrect and unfair, especially with respect to tardy desk rejections[2]. There are no support structures to offer authors who are victimized by editorial inefficiencies, no accountability, and no consequences for the perpetrators of such actions, in this case editors. Unfairly-induced stresses caused by professional victimization undoubtedly impact scientists with families.

WHO and the US CDC, among other leading healthcare organizations, now consider the COVID-19 pandemic to be over, although societies and medical communities need to take precautionary measures to avoid flare-ups in infections, and thus possible deaths [3]. One of the issues that was raised initially, when the pandemic was still having a dramatic impact on many global societies, was how individuals might abuse it for unfair personal and professional gains[4]. It is likely that individuals were too preoccupied with their own struggles, health and otherwise[5], to be able to focus enough attention on such abusive practices.

This letter reflects on a potentially abusive or even predatory editorial practice, namely to blame COVID-19 for direct or indirect editorial failures, such as delayed desk rejections that might take months to achieve, but which should in principle be screened within at most a few days or a week or two. More importantly, it is argued that editors have the responsibility of offering proof to support their claims that COVID-19 was responsible for editorial failures, delays or inefficiencies. Absent concrete, publicly verifiable proof, arguments by editors should be considered null and void, and thus inadmissible to a paper's rejection from a journal.

In such a case, authors should be able to exercise their rights, not only to demand proof, but in the case where they feel that they have been treated unfairly, or that their work or intellect has been grossly mishandled by the journal editor, to initiate an investigation and seek

justice, including but not limited to, a fresh and rapid evaluation of their work in a conflict-free environment. Absent proof, and absent the ability of an author to fairly challenge editors who make such potentially ludicrous claims without proof, are such journals not operating on a principle of “junk” management that victimizes authors unfairly [6]?

Editors who issue tardy desk rejections or excuses for poor editorial handling have the opportunity of doing the right thing, by offering proof to support their excuse, and to thus prove that their rejections are realistic.

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