

By Alan H. Chambers

# How I became easy prey

I was nursing my wounds from my latest manuscript rejection when the email arrived. I was about 2 years into my assistant professorship, with the tenure clock running at full speed, and the pressure to publish was immense. I knew that navigating rejection was part of the job, but I was also starting to wonder whether my study—a modest project designed to be feasible with the minimal lab space and skeleton crew of a new professor—would ever see the light of day. So when I received the email from a newly launched journal inviting me to publish with them, I saw a lifeline. That's when my troubles started.

I had heard about “predatory” journals during my graduate training but had no experience with them. The email appeared legitimate. It spelled my name correctly, referenced some of my previous work, and used correct grammar. The journal wasn't on Beall's List of Predatory Journals and Publishers. I thought I had done my due diligence. I submitted my manuscript. Shortly after, I celebrated the first round of favorable reviews. Things were going great—or so I thought.

Maybe it was the daily emails requesting my revisions, but something started to seem off. I rechecked Beall's list—still nothing. I found that a post-doc at my institution was listed on the journal's website as a member of the editorial board. I sent him an email asking about his experience with the journal, hoping he would confirm its legitimacy. That's when the roof started to cave in. My colleague explained that he had never actually worked with the journal. He eventually realized that it wasn't a reputable publication, but he hadn't been able to get his name removed from the website. Then a trusted mentor suggested that I check up on the parent publisher. There it was, on Beall's infamous list. My stomach tightened. I had fallen prey to a predatory journal. I worried that publishing in such a journal could hurt my tenure case and harm my reputation as a scientist.

I asked the journal to withdraw my manuscript from review, figuring that was the logical next step. They demanded that I justify my decision and debated my right to withdraw, insisting that I pay at least \$400 to do so. After an exchange of emails—akin to “no way,” “yes way,” and “no way”—and one phone call demanding payment, I informed the journal that we were at an impasse and diverted all correspondence to the trash. I submitted the manuscript to a demonstrably



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extortion, and I refused. Bewildered about how to move forward, I again reached out to my mentor. His email reply simply read “Not good,” and we got to work on a plan. After a week's worth of back and forth correspondence, including a document on official university letterhead and threats of legal action and wide exposure, we finally persuaded the journal to withdraw the work and dismiss the fees. However, 4 weeks later, the manuscript is still available online.

I fell into this trap because of my ignorance. I now ignore every invitation to publish my research in any journal. And I know to be wary of any offer that comes via email, whether from journals or international conferences. After all, time spent on manuscript hostage negotiations doesn't count toward tenure. ■

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# Science

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