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Editorial

Past and present of misconduct in scientific publications in Peru

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An exploration in Scimago Journal & Contry Rank, shows that since 2014, Peru has had a continuous growth in the volume of scientific production[1]. This growth coincides with the incorporation of the University Law No. 30220 of 2014, where research constitutes an essential and mandatory function of the university [2].

Behind this increase in scientific production, there was and will continue to be some incentive. Incentive and recognition policies for research have a positive purpose, both for the institutions, the country and the researchers; however, they can be a potential breeding ground for research malpractice if adequate controls are not in place [3].

Research misconduct is defined as "fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results". To be considered research misconduct, actions must represent a "significant departure from accepted practices", "committed intentionally, or knowingly, or recklessly", and be "proven by a preponderance of evidence"[4].

Research misconduct can be grouped into four broad categories: violations in obtaining scientific knowledge, in collaboration and publication, in obtaining research funding, or in providing scientific expertise to others [5]. There are several types of scientific misconduct, such as fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, authorship problems, peer review problems and manipulation [6].

In Peru, in the last few months, the media reported an accusation described as the "Scientists' Farm", where a group of professors from both public and private universities paid to be included as co-authors of a research study [7]. This is a case of Ghost Authorship, a condition considered when there is little or no participation.

The research misconduct market has also evolved, they now have an active presence on the web and social networks. There is a black market for academic degree theses offered in front of universities, virtually or in advertisements posted on walls and poles [8]. If we browse the web and social networks, we can notice that full thesis development services abound, and they present themselves as "counseling centers" [9]. In the past, as part of the evaluation for admission to medical residency, scientific papers presented at academic congresses were given a bonus to the applicant; however, after fraud (plagiarism, honorary authorship and purchase of authorship) was evidenced, they were excluded [10].

Without hesitation, at some stage of our academic endeavors, we may have experienced or witnessed some behavior or practice that can be questioned today. My doctoral thesis led to the publication of three scientific articles, because according to the university

regulations, in order to obtain the degree, a published article had to be accredited and the content of that article had to be part of the thesis. This situation may be compatible with a "Salami slicing" type of publication, which consists of publishing many articles from a single study [6][11]. The intention to obtain a doctoral degree and the publication of the work was not monetarily motivated, but a healthy intention to publish in a scientific journal as part of a personal achievement.

In more recent years, in the university or healthcare field, I have taken the initiative to create research groups with a multidisciplinary approach, hoping for a fruitful, synergic and reciprocal experience. However, in most cases, the achievement has been unsatisfactory; the attendance of those invited to the meetings was remarkable, but with little contribution to the content of the article submitted for publication.

At another time, I met a researcher with a graduate degree abroad who had an impressive capacity and ability to prepare scientific articles but lacked the empathy to work in a team; however, I noticed that he was able to turn close student collaborators into authors of articles. Contrary to this case, I met two researchers, professors at several universities, who had few skills to write a scientific article. In recent years, they have had an impressive production, including research outside their areas of expertise.

A few months ago, I received a phone call from a university professor asking me if I had any finished articles. Obviously, the intention was to find out if there was room for co-authorship. He mentioned that his university could pay the article processing charge (APC). Another professor also showed interest in a co-authorship for his daughter, who was in her first year of medical school at a private university. Persons seeking authorship did not obtain favorable results, the application was rejected.

These cases are compatible with Ghost Authorship, which consists of including the name of someone who has little or no collaboration [6]. According to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), authorship is based on four criteria: 1) Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND, 2) Drafting the work or reviewing it critically for important intellectual content; AND, 3) Final approval of the version to be published; AND, 4) Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved [12].

In the university community, it is a duty to support junior researchers, teachers and students. Requests for cooperation at various stages of the investigation are common and, in some cases, may lead to co-authorship in investigations. According to ICMJE, all those designated as authors must meet the four authorship criteria, and all those who meet the four criteria must be identified as authors [12].

What is the motivation for engaging in acts of scientific misconduct? The main reasons can be synthesized in the following expressions: "publish or perish" and "a gap in knowledge". "Publish or perish" means that there is great pressure on academics who want to succeed to publish more papers in a very short period, otherwise there is no place for them in the competitive academic environment; while "a knowledge gap" refers to a lack of linguistic, illustrative or scientific skills [5][6].

In Peru, scientific misconduct is aimed at economic benefit and curriculum vitae improvement. Likewise, this practice was already known, but it was not reported in time [7]. Misconduct is not only present in Peru. In the international context, there are emblematic cases in which administrative actions were imposed due to findings of misconduct in the investigation [4]. Likewise, ethical violations also account for a significant percentage of retracted articles [13].

It is also pertinent to comment on some situations that may be at the root of scientific misconduct. In universities it is a tradition to delay thesis advising, the review of the advisor takes forever; however, when you pay for a certain service such as a thesis workshop course, refer to an editing and/or proofreading service, choose a certain advisor or "talk" to someone, the process is accelerated significantly.

What do we do to reduce scientific misconduct? Trainings and workshops may have some effect on research integrity [14][15]. In this scenario, universities, research centers and ethics committees have the duty to promote and monitor ethical conduct in research. The integrity of the researchers must also be evaluated, not just admitting them to adorn the front pages, increase the volume of scientific production, acquire greater visibility or improve the reputation of the institution. Researchers not only carry out activities inherent to the research process, but also train and supervise associates and students, and become involved in the life of the scientific community [16].

In conclusion, scientific misconduct is a recurring problem, and the actions of academic institutions and the maturity of researchers can be the antidotes against dishonest practices. Time and training are essential, they strengthen integrity as a person, teacher and researcher.

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