

Buyer Beware

Avoiding the Minefield of Predatory Conferences

By now the dangers of predatory open access sites are fairly well known to researchers submitting scientific manuscripts for publication. Less is known about predatory conferences. Yet, the number of dodgy e-mails coming into my inbox asking me to present at an international conference seems to grow each month. The invitations often offer a desirable exotic vacation destination as the conference site, and that is just the start of the pitch. It seems worthwhile to spend a few minutes describing the latest predatory menace and highlighting a few potential red flags that should be investigated before registering for a scientific conference.

Solicitations from conference hosts often state that as an esteemed expert in the field, your presentation would be highly desirable. Yet the conference topics are often far afield from a recipient's area of expertise. Based on e-mail invitations currently in my queue, I have suddenly become an esteemed expert in dermatology, dentistry, and biomedical engineering. Here is one example, with grammatical and other errors retained:

This is your single best chance to achieve the most important assemblage of participants from the Top Universities, Research institutions, and Hospitals. Meet your Target Market with members from all around the world centered on learning regarding dermatology entanglement. Conduct demonstrations and distribute data, meet with current and potential speaker, create a splash with replacement wares. World-renowned speakers, the foremost recent techniques, tactics, and also the newest updates in Dermatology and promoting fields square measure hallmarks of this conference. (Spring Dermatology 2018, personal e-mail communication, November 14, 2017)

The message advised that it was soliciting my presence because of my eminence in dermatology, and that I would "Meet world leading Space Researchers, Scientists,

Delegates and Students from 50 different Countries & 5 Continents" (Spring Dermatology 2018, personal e-mail communication, November 14, 2017). I have no expertise, publications, or presentations in the field of dermatology.

Predatory conferences are designed for the sole purpose of making money (Sorooshian, 2017). The conference may never be held or be of low quality, with minimal to no peer review. Often, multiple conferences are held in the same hotel over a few days to save money (Beall, 2016). Sponsors make money through registration fees and other charges, such as meals and sight-seeing events bundled with the event. The "conference" generally comprises a small number of attendees reading their papers to one another (Beall, 2016). What the sponsors are really doing is exploiting young scientists who need presentations and publications to advance their career and obtain tenure.

The emphasis on profits over substance is well illustrated by Christopher Bartneck, a professor in New Zealand. Having no expertise in physics, Bartneck used the auto-complete feature on his iPhone® to submit a paper to the International Conference on Atomic and Nuclear Physics sponsored by an open-access publisher called OMICS Group. He started a sentence with the word "atomic" or "nuclear" and then randomly chose words from the auto-complete suggestions. He added a figure from Wikipedia and a few references to the abstract. The text was nonsensical, but nonetheless was accepted for publication within 3 hours of submission (Bartneck, 2016).

In August 2016, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) filed a complaint for permanent injunction and other equitable relief against OMICS, saying the publisher deceives scholars and misrepresents the editorial rigor of its journals and conferences (FTC v. OMICS Group Inc., 2016). The complaint cites many issues regarding conferences, including:

In addition to their various journals, Defendants also organize scientific conferences in the United States and abroad. To solicit consumers to register for these conferences, Defendants represent that various academic experts have agreed to participate in the conferences. In reality, in many instances, the identified academic experts have not agreed to participate in these conferences. Consumers spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on registration fees and travel costs to attend these scientific conferences. (*FTC v. OMICS Group Inc.*, 2016, p. 5)

Anyone with information regarding predatory scientific dissemination venues may report it to the FTC (access <https://www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov/#crnt&panel1-3>).

It is not difficult to find credible high-quality conferences—they are generally hosted by organizations or universities on an annual basis. During your searches, be wary of conferences that are single events or hosted by one or a few individuals, even if the names listed are well-known in the field. Errors in grammar, spelling, and content in the field are other signs of a predatory conference (AuthorAID Team, 2017). There should also be a peer-review process in place that occurs over a period of time. See if there are directions on the website for becoming a peer reviewer and evaluate whether the peer-review process seems legitimate. Check out programs from past conferences for speakers of renown and other events hosted by these groups. If many single-event conferences are held on a wide variety of topics, this could be a predatory conference. Legitimate conferences generally have a long, well-established history that can easily be accessed through a bit of internet searching. If there is an opportunity to get your research submitted to a publication affiliated with the conference, determine if the publication is indexed in PubMed or other major databases.

The onslaught of predatory publishing and conferences leaves me wondering, what's next? The terra firma of scientific dissemination has become a minefield that threatens the quality and progress of science and gerontological health care. We need to help students and new scientists avoid these scams. A reference librarian at my University, for example, has volunteered to investigate conferences for legitimacy before our faculty or doctoral students register for the event. Scientific dissemination is always evolving, but at this point in its evolution we must hold firm the standards of scientific integrity in any way within our purview.

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