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Vaishnavi V
BDS, Lecturer, Department of
Public Health Dentistry, Thai
Moogambigai Dental College and
Hospital, Chennai, Tamil Nadu,
India

A Vinita Mary
MDS, Ph.D., Professor and Head,
Department of Public Health
Dentistry, Thai Moogambigai
Dental College and Hospital,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

R Kesavan
MDS, Ph.D., Professor,
Department of Public Health
Dentistry, Thai Moogambigai
Dental College and Hospital,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Vithiya SK
BDS, Junior Resident,
Department of Public Health
Dentistry, Thai Moogambigai
Dental College and Hospital,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Aarthi R
BDS, Junior Resident,
Department of Public Health
Dentistry, Thai Moogambigai
Dental College and Hospital,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Keerthana AA
BDS, Junior Resident,
Department of Public Health
Dentistry, Thai Moogambigai
Dental College and Hospital,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding Author:
Vaishnavi V
BDS, Lecturer, Department of
Public Health Dentistry, Thai
Moogambigai Dental College and
Hospital, Chennai, Tamil Nadu,
India

From awareness to action: Surveying publication ethics in academic research among dental healthcare fraternity

Vaishnavi V, A Vinita Mary, R Kesavan, Vithiya SK, Aarthi R and Keerthana AA

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Abstract

Background: Publication ethics is the cornerstone of academic and scientific integrity, ensuring the trust and credibility of scholarly research, particularly in the academic and dental communities. Ethical research and transparent publications are the foundation for dental progress. The present study was designed to assess the knowledge and awareness of ethical publication among emerging and experienced researchers.

Method: A self-structured questionnaire comprising seven sections and 46 questions was constructed and distributed online to students and faculty at private dental colleges in Tamil Nadu. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

Result: The outcomes reveal the respondents' experiences with publications and level of ethical consciousness. The majority of research participants were well informed about authorship concerns in publications; of 172, 65 (37.8%) were aware about the definition of plagiarism. Majority of the participants, 33 (19.2%) expressed dissatisfaction with the idea of not considering plagiarism in papers with great scientific value; 39 (22.7%) research participants recognised that publishing multiple times was unethical. Out of the total participants, 79 (46.0%) expressed agreement with the article draft's disclosure of conflicts of interest. Merely 29 individuals, (16.9%), believed that manipulating or creating fake data to submit a study was not acceptable.

Conclusion: This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on publication ethics awareness and practice within the dental community, offering insights to further strengthen ethical standards in dental research and publication.

Keywords: Plagiarism, authorship guideline, ethics, research publications

Introduction

Publication ethics stands as the bedrock of academic and scientific integrity, safeguarding the trust and credibility of scholarly research. Within the academic and dental communities, the responsible conduct of research and the publication of its outcomes are paramount, ensuring that advancements in oral health and dentistry are built upon a solid foundation of ethics and transparency^[1]. A scientific article is a well-structured description of the hypothesis, evidence, and conclusions with the goal of instructing the readers. Research is not considered complete unless it is published or documented. The publication of research papers plays a vital role in advancing modern science. It establishes a framework where the findings of one researcher serve as the groundwork upon which others can build and make further contributions to the field^[2]. The foundation of the publishing system is the confidence that all of the dynamically interacting groups (co-authors, editors, publishers, and peer reviewers) remain honest and adhere to the standards and ethics of scientific integrity^[3]. Lack of knowledge often leads to scientific misconduct, which can include redundant publication, authorship disputes, conflicts of interest, copyright violations, data fabrication, plagiarism, duplicate publication, informed consent, ethics approval, and predatory publishing. In postgraduate medical training, there may be a greater chance of ethical errors and publication misconduct due to the lack of or very little prior training and the pressure to publish^[2].

In the present times, instructors and students often conduct research projects at medical schools and other health professional colleges. Publication of the findings of any biomedical study is crucial, and ethical publication of these outcomes is even more crucial. Medical researchers have an ethical responsibility to connect with readers and provide them with only truthful information, in order to maintain the integrity of scientific research [4]. The present study was aimed at assessing staff members' and students' knowledge and awareness of publication ethics at private dental institutions in Tamil Nadu.

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional survey involving staff members and students at private dental colleges in Tamil Nadu was conducted. The study was approved by the ethics committee board of Dr. MGR Educational and Research Institute, Chennai, India.

An online self-structured questionnaire comprising seven parts and forty-six closed-ended questions, including demographic data, was created using Google Forms. Through email, the questionnaire was distributed to the faculty and students of multiple private dental institutions located all over Tamil Nadu. A total of 172 responses were obtained and included in the study.

To analyse the data SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 23.0, Armonk, NY: IBM Corp. Released 2015) was used.

Results

(Table 1) displays the respondents' demographic information; of the 172, 115 (66.9%) were female and 57 (33.1%) were male. The publication experience of the study participants is shown in Table 2, where 101 (58.7%) respondents have not published any papers and 67 (39.0%) respondents have published articles in a journal. In this present study, 98 (57.0%) of those who took part have no published articles, 49 (28.5%) have one to five published articles, 18 (10.5%) have six to ten published articles, and 7 (4.1%) have more than ten published articles. 52 (30.2%) of the 172 respondents claimed that they were aware of publication ethics. Of the research participants, 112 (65.1%) received knowledge on publication ethics and regulations. 95 (55.2%) participants are aware that breaking publishing guidelines would negatively impact the career of the involved author. The present study provides an

insight into the publication experiences and ethical awareness of the respondents. Out of the total participants (172), a majority of 92 (53.5%) reported satisfying original idea for the study as criteria that satisfied authorship (Table 3). In terms of criteria specifically for corresponding authorship, analysing the data was predominantly preferred by 85(49.4%) of the study participants. A significant number of responses 71 (41.3%) disclosed that they have never demanded for authorship for which they aren't qualified.

On assessing knowledge on plagiarism (Table 4), a majority of 65 (37.8%) considered plagiarism as turning others' idea, text and photo as his/her own study with 56 (32.6%) who recognised that Plagiarism or copying is a common practise. Only 21(12.2%) out of total study population were against the act of ignoring plagiarism in research paper if the paper has high scientific value.

Regarding Redundant publication (Table 5) reveals a significant portion of respondents acknowledged the proper understanding of Salami slicing, with the highest response of 75 (43.6%) as the segmentation of a large study. Ethical perspectives on redundant or multiple publications revealed varied viewpoints, with a considerable number of participants 39 (22.7%) who deemed the practise of multiple publication as unethical.

Knowledge on conflict of interest in research among the dental faculty and students (Table 6) shows that among the total study participants 50 (29.1%) acknowledged Conflict of interest as losing interest over time and 55 (44.2%) respondents agreed to disclose conflict of interest in the article draft. Majority of the participants 54 (31.4%) agreed that it may impact the integrity or quality of research with 37 (21.5%) participants reporting that Disclosure of conflicts of interest was the best way to manage it.

On questioning about data manipulation (Table 7) 54 (31.4%) participants are aware that fabrication of data means manipulation or cooking up data. About 53 (30.8%) participants reported altering and manipulating data as Falsification of data wherein only 29 (16.9%) disagree to justify this act in order to get a paper published.

Table 1: Demographic data of the study participants:

Variables	Options	frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	115	66.9
	Male	57	33.1

Table 2: Participants experience regarding publication

Questions	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Have you ever published an article (original research or case report or case series or review article) in an indexed peer - reviewed journal?	Yes	67	39.0
	No	101	58.7
Do you have previous publication(s) in peer-reviewed journals?	Yes	61	35.5
	No	106	61.6
How many articles (original research or case report or case series or review article) have you published in indexed, peer- reviewed journals?	0	98	57.0
	1-5	49	28.5
	6-10	18	10.5
	>10	7	4.1
You think you have adequate knowledge regarding publication ethics.	Strongly agree	27	15.7
	Agree	52	30.2
	Neutral	76	44.2
	Disagree	10	5.8
	Strongly disagree	7	4.1
Have you ever been taught a subject relevant to publications' ethics and rules?	Yes	112	65.1
	No	60	34.9
A violation of publications' rules will affect the career of the involved author(s).	Agree	95	55.2
	Neutral	63	36.6
	Disagree	10	5.8
	Strongly disagree	4	2.3

Table 3: Participants response regarding authorship issues

Questions	Options	Frequency	Percentage
1. Which of the following satisfy the criteria for authorship	Examined patients.	30	17.4
	Obtained grant.	24	14.0
	Original idea for study.	92	53.5
	Supervised collection of study.	26	15.1
2. Criteria for corresponding authorship:	Gave technical help with presentation.	52	30.2
	Analysed the data.	85	49.4
	Gave statistical help.	22	12.8
	Collected samples.	13	7.6
3. In case of disclosure of publication misconduct, all co-authors are responsible	Strongly agree	37	21.5
	Agree	74	43.0
	Neutral	49	28.5
	Disagree	7	4.1
	Strongly disagree.	5	2.9
4. Because this is my study, I can add name of my colleague in my publication as 'Gift authorship'	Strongly agree	33	19.2
	Agree	54	31.4
	Neutral	64	37.2
	Disagree	13	7.6
	Strongly disagree	8	4.7
5. Added one or more authors to a paper who did not qualify for authorship ("honorary authorship")	Never	53	30.8
	Once	36	20.9
	Occasionally	26	15.1
	Sometimes	24	14.0
	Often	11	6.4
	Not always	11	6.4
	Not applicable	11	6.4
6. Demanded authorship for which you did not qualify ("honorary authorship")	Never	71	41.3
	Once	21	12.2
	Occasionally	29	16.9
	Sometimes	24	14.0
	Often	10	5.8
	Not always	6	3.5
	Not applicable	11	6.4

Table 4: Participants knowledge on plagiarism

Questions	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Which of the following practice may be considered as plagiarism?	The author turns another's idea as his or her own.	52	30.2
	The author turns another's text as his or her own.	45	26.2
	The author turns another's photo or figure as his or her own.	10	5.8
	All choices	65	37.8
Plagiarism or copying is very common	Strongly agree	40	23.3
	Agree	56	32.6
	Neutral	52	30.2
	Disagree	16	9.3
	Strongly disagree	8	4.7
In what way coping another's work, word-for-word, may not be regarded as plagiarism?	The author copies a few phrases without citing to sources.	43	25.0
	The author copies a few phrases with quotations and cites to sources properly.	86	50.0
	There is no limitation if the author cites to sources properly.	20	11.6
	There is no limitation if the author cites to sources properly and uses quotations.	23	13.4
The plagiarism is the appropriation of six or more words in one row from another article without quotation marks and citing the original paper.	Strongly Agree	43	25.0
	Agree	52	30.2
	Neutral	56	32.6
	Disagree	43	25.0
	Strongly disagree	7	4.1
Self-plagiarism is not punishable because it is not harmful.	Strongly Agree	33	19.2
	Agree	55	32.0
	Neutral	63	36.6
	Disagree	15	8.7
	Strongly disagree	6	3.5
Plagiarized part of a paper may be ignored if the paper is of great scientific value	Strongly Agree	33	19.2
	Agree	51	29.7
	Neutral	55	32.0
	Disagree	21	12.2
	Strongly disagree	12	7.0
A postgraduate trainee copied a senior's thesis done about five years ago verbatim, presented the work at the	The trainee's degree may be revoked.	39	22.7
	The trainee may be asked to acknowledge the senior's work in the thesis.	67	39.0
	The trainee may be asked to change the words, phrases and sentences in the	50	29.1

institute and got the best thesis award. The senior gets to know this and raises a 'plagiarism' issue. What is the likely consequence?	thesis and resubmit it.		
	The trainee may be apprehended and the senior may be asked to not take the matter further in favour of the reputation of the institute.	16	9.3

Table 5: Participants response on redundant publication

Questions	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Salami slicing refers to:	Segmenting a large study.	75	43.6
	Same hypothesis.	52	30.2
	Publishing study in different journals.	35	20.3
	Duplicate publication.	10	5.8
Is it acceptable to split the results of a study and publish them separately?	Strongly Agree	23	13.4
	Agree	152	30.2
	Neutral	71	41.3
	Disagree	14	8.1
Redundant or multiple publications is not unethical	Strongly disagree	12	7.0
	Strongly Agree	23	13.4
	Agree	39	22.7
	Neutral	77	44.8
Previously published data can be reused without disclosure ("duplicate publication")	Disagree	17	9.9
	Strongly disagree	16	9.3
	Never	55	32.0
	Not always	14	8.1
Submitted the same manuscript to multiple journals at once ("duplicate" or "double submission")	Not applicable	7	4.1
	Occasionally	35	20.3
	Often	5	2.9
	Once	26	15.1
You submitted a manuscript to a reputed journal A, but over time you feel that journal B is more likely to publish your manuscript. Journal A has asked you to revise your manuscript and resubmit it. What would you do?	Sometimes	30	17.4
	Never	59	34.3
	Not always	9	5.2
	Not applicable	8	4.7
I will revise and submit it to journal A and simultaneously to journal B, wait to see where it is accepted first and withdraw my manuscript from the other	Occasionally	32	18.6
	Often	9	5.2
	Once	27	15.7
	Sometimes	28	16.3
I will withdraw my article from Journal A and submit it to Journal B	I will submit the manuscript to journal B and declare to them that the same manuscript has also been submitted to journal A	23	13.4
	I will seek permission from journal A to submit the manuscript to Journal B simultaneously	21	12.2

Table 6: Participants awareness about conflicts of interest in research

Questions	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Conflicts of interest means:	Losing interest over time.	50	29.1
	Altering the concept of study.	56	32.6
	Adding up ideas to the existing study	45	26.2
	Unaltered interest.	21	12.2
Types of conflicts of interest are:	Conflicts of roles	24	14.0
	Pre-determination	42	24.4
	Financial & non- financial	30	17.4
	All the above	76	44.2
The draft of the article must include the disclosure of conflicts of interest	Strongly Agree	24	14.0
	Agree	55	32.0
	Neutral	68	39.5
	Disagree	15	8.7
If you recognize conflicts of interest in article or research, how would you describe it?	Strongly disagree	10	5.8
	Ethical	40	23.3
	Unethical	48	27.9
	Ethical when recognised as early	55	32.0
What situation might be considered a conflict of interest? A researcher who (select all that apply):	Can't decide	29	16.9
	Owns stock of the pharmaceutical company commissioning the research work.	45	26.2
	Is also a consultant to the company commissioning the research work	49	28.5
	Is asked to review a manuscript submitted by a colleague	25	14.5
The existence of conflicts of interest could impact the integrity /	All the above	53	30.8
	Strongly Agree	33	19.2
	Agree	54	31.4

quality of research.	Neutral	61	35.5
	Disagree	11	6.5
	Strongly disagree	13	7.6
The best way to manage conflicts of interest is to:	Missing data	30	17.4
	Avoid the present conflicts of interest.	85	49.4
	Disclosure of conflicts of interests.	37	21.5
	Ignore	20	11.6

Table 7: Represents data on participants response regarding Data manipulation

Questions	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Are falsification and fabrication of data means the same?	Strongly agree	32	18.6
	Agree	54	31.4
	Neutral	55	32.0
	Disagree	22	12.8
	Strongly disagree	9	5.2
Fabrication of data means	Duplication of data	35	20.3
	Invention or cooking up data	54	31.4
	Altering the data	33	19.2
	Both b and c	50	29.1
Falsification of data means:	Altering the data	26	15.1
	Manipulating the results	59	34.3
	Cooking up data	34	19.8
	Both a and b	53	30.8
It is justifiable to alter or fabricate data in order to get a paper published	Strongly Agree	25	14.5
	Agree	37	21.5
	Neutral	68	39.5
	Disagree	29	16.9
	Strongly disagree	13	7.6
A researcher might be looking for a particular outcome, and the actual research did not support their theory. They might manipulate the data or analysis to match the research to the desired results. It's a case of	Fabrication of data	65	37.8
	Falsification of data	40	23.3
	Both	67	39.0
When a researcher, states that a particular lab process was done when, in fact, it wasn't. Or that the research didn't take place at all, in the case of a study results from previous research were copied and published as original research. It's a case of	Fabrication of data	52	30.2
	Falsification of data	53	30.8
	Both	67	39.0
A trainee researcher conducts a study to assess the efficacy of a nutritional supplement for lowering blood pressure. Statistical analysis reveals that the supplement is not effective. The researcher manipulates the data to get a significant P. The study is then submitted to a journal and the reviewer suspects manipulation of data. What could be the consequences?	The journal may request the researcher to submit the raw data and if any manipulation is found, the article may be rejected.	52	30.2
	The journal may communicate with the head of the department and report the misconduct.	51	29.7
	The journal may communicate with the head of the institute and report the misconduct.	23	13.4
	The publisher may blacklist the researcher from submitting their work to any of its journals	8	4.7
	All the above	38	22.1

Table 8: Represents participant's response on image manipulation

Questions	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Do you think you have adequate knowledge regarding two basic categories of image manipulation: Clarification and Deception.	Yes	57	33.1
	No	45	26.2
	Maybe	70	40.7
Enhancement of image is considered as manipulation of image.	Strongly Agree	22	12.8
	Agree	40	23.3
	Neutral	72	41.9
	Disagree	24	14.0
	Strongly disagree	14	8.1
Image manipulation can be acceptable if:	Removal of some portion	32	18.6
	Image processing is documented	65	37.8
	Image processing alters the originality	52	30.2
	Grouping of images	23	13.4
It is mandatory to obtain the permission of the original author for taking over (downloading) figures, photos and tables.	Strongly Agree	39	22.7
	Agree	48	27.9
	Neutral	60	34.9
	Disagree	13	7.6
	Strongly disagree	12	7.0

Discussion

Participants in the current study were 172 dental faculty members and graduates. Out of the total responses 52 (30.2%) possess sufficient knowledge regarding publication ethics; this low percentage has been reflected by inadequate curriculum on ethical publication. Based on the present study's findings, 67 (39.0%) had published research/review articles in the past, whereas 101 (58.7%) had not. When participants' knowledge of authorship was assessed, 92 (53.5%) acknowledged that the study's original idea as the criteria for authorship while remaining considered examining patients, supervising data collection and obtaining a grant as criteria for authorship.

In terms of eligibility to corresponding authorship, out of 172 responses, 85 (49.4%) opted data analysis while 52(30.2%) opted technical assistance for the presentation as criteria for corresponding authorship. In addition, 22 individuals (12.8%) chose statistical support, and 13(7.6%) opted sample collection as main criteria for this authorship eligibility. Although this brings to the notice of good fundamental knowledge in the understanding of authorship among the study participants, there still exists a need to educate the same in depth. In the present study 71(41.3%) people have never demanded authorship for the study which they are ineligible. In a study by Anthony R. Artino ^[5], similar findings were reported with a higher response of 550 (97.3%) amongst researchers worldwide.

The practise of Plagiarism or copying being most common in research work has been agreed by 56 (32.6%) respondents in the present study. Similar findings were noted in the study by Suchet Trigotra *et al.* in the state of Haryana, India ^[4], 68 (47.55%).

The present study reveals an adequate level of knowledge on plagiarism among the participants, as majority 65 (37.8%), think copying others' idea, text and photo as his/her own constitute to plagiarism. The majority of participants in the current study 21(12.2%) and the study by Pupovac *et al.* ^[6] 43(30%) showed their disagreement to ignore plagiarism in a paper in case where the paper holds high scientific value, this suggests that participants were less aware on publication guidelines.

Out of the total responses, 17 (9.9%) acknowledged redundant or multiple publication as unethical; whereas in the study conducted by Suchet Trigotra *et al.* ^[4] a high response of 32(22.37%) was reported. This indicates difference of opinion in understanding knowledge regarding the validity of duplicate or multiple publications.

The term "conflict of interest" was acknowledged by 50 (29.1%) indicating a notable level of understanding regarding the same in paper publications. A total of 55 (32.0%) individuals reported that disclosing conflict of interest should be part of the article text and 37 (21.5%) agreed that this practise is the best way to manage conflict of interest. This suggests that participants have very least concerned on conflicts of interest during research and the way to handle it. The participants' response indicates that they need to be trained about the concept of conflict of interest in research. In the present study, 29 participants (16.9%) disagreed to justify the act of altering or manipulating data in order to get a paper published and this response rate was found to be low when compared to the study conducted by Suchet Trigotra *et al.* ^[4], where 50 participants (34.96%) disagreed.

Conclusion

The present study sheds light on participants' varied opinions

and practices related to publication knowledge and ethical awareness. There is a noticeable gap in their knowledge regarding data and image manipulation, as well as conflicts of interest in research that are factors critical to maintaining research quality and integrity. In order to address these gaps and foster a more consistent adherence to ethical principles, the development of precise standards and operating procedures is recommended. This could contribute to a more uniform understanding among writers and researchers.

Conflict of Interest

Not available

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Not available

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