

(3.2) Redundant publication

You have worked closely over the past year with a colleague in the internal medicine department on a project involving clinical and imaging findings in patients with a rare vasculitis. You and your colleague recently published a retrospective case series summarizing your observations in a general medicine journal. That article provided a fairly detailed summary of the patients' clinical findings, as well as implications for management, although also reporting on their imaging findings. You and your colleague are now considering writing an additional article regarding the condition, based on the same patient cohort, though this time more heavily emphasizing the imaging findings and submitting the paper to an imaging journal. Since this new project would be aimed for a different audience and indeed be modified in order to reflect this new focus, you and your colleague feel comfortable in proceeding with your plan. What ethical issues would be raised by doing so?

Commentary

Publication of substantially overlapping data in separate publications in a manner that may mislead or deceive readers constitutes redundant publication. Neither slight alterations to the presentation of the data within the manuscript or publication within journals targeting distinct audiences justify this course of action. By producing multiple publications that present heavily overlapping results, redundant publication inflates the perceived significance of the findings within the peer-reviewed literature and leads to inaccurate representation of the relative frequency of the condition within meta-analyses.

In some instances, depending on the extent of the differences in comparisons with the authors' earlier publications, there may be reasonable uncertainty whether redundant publication exists. Authors should maintain full transparency, explicitly noting within the manuscript, typically within the Methods section, the extent of overlap with earlier papers, both directly citing the earlier works and commenting on the differences in scope in the present paper. In addition, the authors should disclose the overlap to the journal within the cover letter, again noting how the present manuscript is different. Journals may also request that the authors provide a copy of their earlier submission in order to allow for a detailed comparison of the two manuscripts in forming a judgment regarding potential redundant publication. If the new manuscript has clear substantive differences from the earlier work, and any overlap is properly disclosed, then the further publication may be deemed acceptable in the given instance.

In the present case, targeting a different audience with what may amount to nearly the same information within the same patient cohort does not appear to constitute a meaningful difference in the work, and the risk of redundant publication appears high. While you may contact the editor of the journal to which the submission is planned in order to receive the journal's input, it overall seems advisable to not proceed with the additional submission, at least in the format described within the case description. In such circumstances, a single manuscript submission targeting the journal and audience best suited for the data at hand would be most appropriate.

References

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