The integrity of the research record: a mess so big and so deep and so tall

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Summary

Poor research integrity is increasingly recognised as a serious problem in science. We outline some evidence for this claim and introduce the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ Research Integrity Group, which has been created to address this problem.

Keywords

Ethics; questionable research practices; research fraud; research integrity; research quality.

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The extent of the problem

Many research findings are incorrect, even if the studies are carried out completely correctly and all are published.1

Sadly, only about half of all registered clinical trials are ever published2 and the published half may well overstate benefits and understate harms. These figures are likely to be worse because of the lower costs and the lack of requirement for registration.

‘Questionable research practices’ (QRPs) are common, including selective reporting, outcome switching, ‘p-hacking’, the seemingly low-consequence ‘gift authorship’ and the fabrication of data.3 These exist because of the tendency for journals to accept papers with eye-catching results over those with more moderate results.4 Hence, journals do to address this enormous problem?

So, what can a single learned society and a small group of scientific journals do to address this enormous problem?

We must accept the pervasiveness and importance of poor research integrity. Accordingly, we have created a Research Integrity Group of the Editorial Boards of the BJPsych, BJPsych Open and BJPsych Bulletin, primarily to oversee investigations
following allegations of poor research integrity in the journals’ published output. We are making this available as a resource to BJPsych Advances and BJPsych International as well. The work of our group will be of value generally to the College’s activities, especially where there are disputes of evidence.

At a system level, we have tightened the initial checks on submitted articles and research papers. All the details of trials are now carefully checked, including that the ethics permission and pre-registration were complete before recruitment began. Automated plagiarism screening is now undertaken on every submission as well. Evidence of outcome switching or poor adherence to protocols results in rejection, whether these become apparent during the initial checks or later. We also now support the use of preprint servers. Within this, we are careful to preserve the pluralism of approaches necessary in our specialty and to draw distinctions between scientific weaknesses, which are inevitable, and poor practice, which is not.

A reasonable concern is that any paper rejected by the RCPsych journals may still be published elsewhere. However, we cannot control that, and high standards are necessary to ensure quality publications in our journals and to lead the development of scientific publication.

As well as serving to oversee investigations following expressions of concern over research integrity matters and working to improve journal and College processes, the Research Integrity Group is linking with other efforts to improve research integrity: we have met with prominent campaigners and managers from other journals to look beyond the immediate problems to reinforce efforts to tackle the perverse incentives that create, nourish, tolerate and protect poor research practices across our sector.

We are trusted to care for people often at the lowest points in their lives. We must bring the best evidence to bear on their individual difficulties. By making those areas over which we have influence as good as they can be, we can honour the motto of our College and ‘Let Wisdom Guide’.

Supplementary material

Further reading can be found in the supplementary material, available online at https://doi.org/10.1192/jnp.2022.74.

Data availability

Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Author contributions

W.L. had the idea and drafted the initial manuscript. All the authors contributed to its further development, both before and after peer review, and all have seen and approved the final version.

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Declaration of interest

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References