

Publish or perish – beware the ethical hazards



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This, our last issue for 2025, contains a bumper harvest of original research and opinion papers, reports, and other news. We are proud to profile Dr Dipalesa Mokoboto, who has been promoted to the position of Chief Director in Occupational Health in the Department of Mineral and Petroleum Resources. We wish her every success in her new role.

On 9 December, I presented a webinar on behalf of the OSHAfrica Scientific Committee on Data, Research and Publication, titled *Publish or Perish*.

Researchers are familiar with the term, which is defined as “*the pressure put on academics to publish in scholarly journals rapidly and continually as a condition for employment (finding a job), promotion, and even maintaining one’s job*”. This continuous and unrelenting race to publish is lifelong, and is the way in which researchers become and remain visible and relevant within the research fraternity. Without visibility, research careers stagnate and die.

In addition to visibility and career progression, the pressure to publish has many benefits. It motivates researchers to increase productivity and promotes healthy competition among peers. The research productivity of individuals contributes to the prestige, rankings, and income of institutions, and the knowledge generated leads to the betterment of society.

Pressure to publish or perish may generate a culture of ‘publish at all costs’, which emphasises quantity at the expense of quality. To publish rapidly, researchers may resort to unethical practices, which include:

- fabrication: outright invention of results
- falsification: manipulation of results to make them more acceptable
- salami slicing: inappropriate division of one substantial study into several smaller publications that do not add meaningful new knowledge
- duplication: publication of the same or similar results in more than one journal, without proper disclosure or justification
- plagiarism: presenting another person’s ideas, words, or work as one’s own, without appropriate acknowledgement or citation
- guest authorship: inclusion of individuals as authors, even though they made little or no meaningful contribution to the research and publication
- ghost authorship: exclusion of individuals who contributed significantly to the research and publication¹

We must be vigilant and ensure that we do not engage in these unethical practices.

Incomplete reporting in publications is an issue that editors encounter often and which should be addressed by authors. All published research should be potentially reproducible. One study found that more than half of the researchers who participated could not reproduce their own experiments.² Poor reproducibility can be avoided by use of correct study designs and methodologies, adequate sample sizes, appropriate analytical methods, and describing methods in sufficient detail in

manuscripts. Consultations with skilled researchers and statisticians should be done at the proposal stage, to ensure that suitable data collection methods are used, sample sizes are sufficient, and all necessary variables are collected. Similarly, at the analysis stage, experts should be consulted to ensure that appropriate statistical or qualitative methods are used and that findings are interpreted correctly. [Several guidelines are available to ensure complete reporting](#). These include the STROBE for reporting of observational studies, CARE for case reports, and PRISMA for systematic reviews. I strongly recommend that authors follow these guidelines.

An example of the surge in numbers of journal publications is the increase in the number of biomedical records indexed in PubMed – from approximately 15 million in 2004 (Vardakas et al., 2015)³ to 39 million in 2025 (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/about/>). The demand for publication has led to a proliferation of new journals, including open access publishing that makes journal papers freely accessible. However, predatory journals, which exploit the open-access model of charging author publication fees, but without legitimate peer review, editorial standards, or quality control, are also common.⁴ While the idea of rapid publication is attractive, researchers must avoid publishing in these journals as this may have negative consequences on their careers.

The large number of uncited published papers is of concern, and raises questions around the need to publish for career progression at the expense of scholarship. Citation indices are used to estimate the impact and influence of research, by providing a measure of the number of times scholarly publications are cited by other authors. Unethical practices by researchers to increase citations, such as excessive self-citation, citation cartels, or coercive citation, should be avoided. There are numerous ethical ways to increase citations. For example, publishing high-quality research that addresses important and relevant questions; careful selection of appropriate journals with good visibility and readership; writing clear, informative titles and abstracts; use of widely searched keywords; sharing publications through academic networks; and presenting work at conferences and seminars to increase exposure. This issue of *Occupational Health Southern Africa* contains abstracts from the 8th Mombasa Annual International OSH Conference covering numerous topical issues. I challenge the authors to convert these abstracts into high-quality papers in recognised journals, if they have not already done so.

We thank everyone who has contributed to the journal – authors, reviewers, readers, Editorial Board, and publishing team members. We wish you all a joyous festive season and productive new year.

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