



# Correcting academic publications. Why is it so difficult? Some suggestions for improvement.

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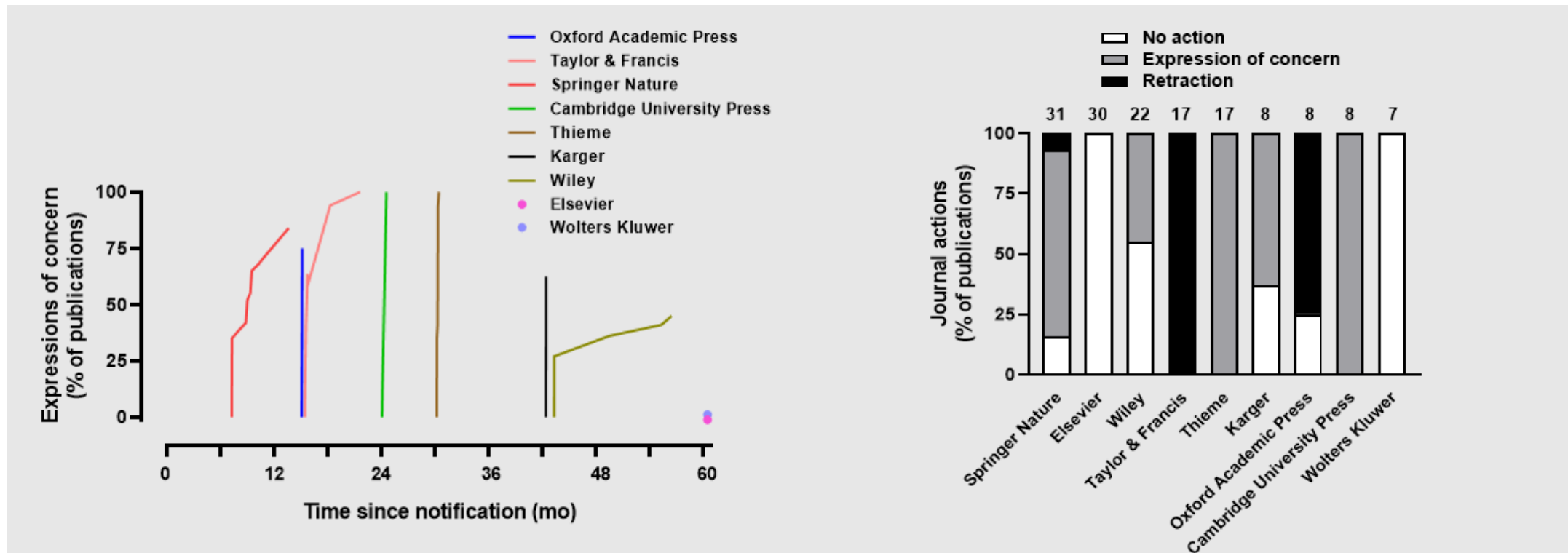
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# 172 RCTs from one group cited by 888 systematic reviews

- 5y later most problematic papers remain unretracted
- Many have no indexed notice



Grey, Avenell, Bolland. J Clin Epidemiol 2025

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0895435625002513?via%3Dihub>

# Why the hold-ups?

- Focus on misconduct rather than publication integrity
- Reputational damage, lack of accountability, differences in goals between readers and publishers
- Lack of responses from authors and institutions
- Results of institutional investigations, even then publishers/journals do not act swiftly/or at all?
- **Fear of legal threats, advice of lawyers**
- Inadequate experience to assess papers
- Failure to connect cases across publishers/journals
- **Inadequate staffing at publishers/journals**
- Lack of tracking systems and timelines, frequent staff turnover

# Inadequate staffing and integrity concern tracking at publishers/journals?

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- **From one publisher's website in 2024:**
  - 3000 journals
  - 30 integrity staff
  - How many cases?
- **From one of our cases (3rd and 7th on RW leaderboard)**
  - 76 journals involved
  - 535 emails sent for 300 papers
  - 35% received a reply
  - Mean duration of an unanswered email 5 months

# Who gets to decide?

EiC1: “Dear Alison: This issue is caught up with the *(publisher's)* lawyers. As you know never ask a lawyer ‘can I do this’. The answer is always no....You and your colleagues write two Letters to the editor.....Each letter covers separately the ms's that are almost certainly fraudulent.”

- 6y for retraction, no expression of concern
- 5m for expression of concern, 3y for retraction

# Who gets to decide?

EiC2: “Yes, they (*the publisher*) have been very reluctant to retract those papers. They first responded and proposed us to announce that those papers were under investigation. We replied to them that your investigation along with the subsequent research by us indicated obvious problems in those papers and that we did not have to investigate again. We asked to announce retraction of those papers.

**11 papers with no notices after 5 years**

Grey A, et al. How to improve assessments of publication integrity.  
<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-02449-8>

# Who gets to decide?

EiC3: “I am completely and totally frustrated by this. *(The publisher)* has a Committee that apparently makes the final decision on matters such as retractions. The recommendation and actual script of what my co-editor .....and I want to be published has been in the hands of that committee now for many months with no action. I have been repeatedly asking our publisher when the decision will be finalized, but have received no response.”

1y for retraction of RCT almost entirely self-plagiarised with logical inconsistencies, no EoC

# Who gets to decide?

EiC4: “We have given (*the publisher*) instructions to retract this paper after emails with the authors, but I am not sure where we stand at the moment.”

“We have asked and asked (*the publisher’s representative*) and she does not answer us at all. I tried to call her and set up a talk but still not.....She is the employee that is suppose(*d*) to take this forward. We really want her to retract it already.”

“I have no power I guess in this matter. We approve(*d*) it long ago. I do not understand the problem actually.”

1y for retraction, no EoC

# Who gets to decide?

- Editors don't necessarily appear to have a role in final decisions at some of the big 5 publishers.
- How are publishers' conflicts of interest handled?
  - Who contributes to final decisions?
  - How do they represent the views of the wider community of researchers and people who use journals?
  - Do these decision-makers have the subject and methodological expertise to make decisions?
- What is the basis for the decision?
  - Protecting the integrity of the published literature the first priority?
  - Do some forms of research have higher priority for action? Who gets to decide and on what basis?
- Why do sleuths never get a detailed response to all concerns raised (unlike that required responding to peer reviewers)?

# Possible solutions??

- Transparency, active engagement of users, avoidance of conflicts of interest. Safety of users the priority, i.e. integrity not misconduct
- Should grant funders set journal standards for receiving funding?
- Clear, visible, unambiguous descriptions on publishers' and journals' websites, and during article submission, for processes dealing with integrity concerns:
  - All authors must agree to these processes at article submission describing:
    - Timelines for authors to respond and provide data (if not already provided)
    - Consequences for publication if authors do not respond (or do not provide a convincing explanation) within the timeline.
- Should integrity case decisions be independent of publishers?

# Key resources

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**REAPPRAISED CHECKLIST:**

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03959-6>

Freely available package “reappraised” for the R statistical programme: <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/reappraised/index.html>

Worked example in Bolland MB et al. J Clin Epidemiol 2024  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2024.111365>