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SCIENCE

Open-access journal editors resign after alleged pressure to publish mediocre papers

By [Jop de Vrieze](#) Sep. 4, 2018 , 3:45 PM

All 10 senior editors of the open-access journal *Nutrients* resigned last month, alleging that the publisher, the Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI), pressured them to accept manuscripts of mediocre quality and importance.

The conflict is familiar for many commercial open-access publishers: Because authors pay fees per published article (about \$1800 in the case of *Nutrients*), the publisher has an incentive to publish as many as possible. On the other hand, scientists prefer to publish in choosy, reputable journals, and academic journal editors want to maintain this quality.

On 15 August, the editor-in-chief of the journal, Jon Buckley, of the University of South Australia in Adelaide, received an email from MDPI announcing his replacement at the end of the year by someone who would “bring different ideas on board.” Buckley says this was an excuse to push him aside because of his strict editorial policy. He resigned immediately, and nine other senior editors followed.

Founded in 1996, Basel, Switzerland-based MDPI, has 213 open-access journals, of which 27 now have an impact factor. In 2014, it was briefly included on a list of predatory publishers maintained by Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado in Boulder, but it was removed after the company appealed the decision. Today, MDPI is included in the Directory of Open Access Journals.

Buckley had been working to boost the visibility and reputation of *Nutrients*, a human clinical nutrition journal founded in 2009. Its impact factor (a measure of how often the journal’s articles are cited) increased from less than one in 2011 to 4.2 in 2017, making it one of MDPI’s most prominent journals.

The number of published papers has also been rising. Between 2009 and 2017, just over 5000 papers have been published—1300 of them in 2017 alone. But according to Buckley, there has also been a sharp rise in the number of low-quality submitted manuscripts. To weed these papers out, Buckley says the journal’s rejection rate would end up having to rise from about 55% to something between 60% and 70%.

MDPI CEO Franck Vazquez objects to this decision. “We are against setting an artificial rejection rate,” he says. “Every article must be evaluated on quality, and if more papers are good enough, more should be published.” Vazquez wants MDPI to be a world leader in the dissemination of science, whereas he says Buckley was focused too much on impact factors. “When an article is sound and useful for researchers, it should be published, even when it is not very novel.”

Lynda Williams of the University of Aberdeen in the United Kingdom, one of the senior editors who stepped down, says editors began to sense pressure to accept more articles in recent months. This spring, a guest editor received comments from MDPI staff for having rejected too many papers, and occasionally the editors were asked to reconsider rejections. Williams feels this strategy will eventually harm the journal’s impact factor and lead to a drop in submissions—threatening the journal itself. “They are essentially killing the cash cow,” Williams says. Vazquez disagrees with this analysis and points out that most of the company’s journals have boosted their impact factors even as they have published more papers. “If I would be killing the cash cow, I would be stupid.”

It is unclear whether editors of other MDPI journals are involved in similar discussions. In a response to an inquiry from *Science*, the recently appointed editor-in-chief of *Marine Drugs*, Orazio Tagliatalata-Scafati of the University of Naples Federico II in Italy, writes that MDPI has “confirmed my absolute freedom to decide,

basing only on the quality of papers. I hope that in the next months they will keep this approach.”

The conflict is salient because this week 11 European national funding organizations announced that beginning in 2020, research they fund [should only be published in open-access journals](#), which make articles publicly available, as opposed to traditional journals, which sometimes block access to nonsubscribers. To maintain a level of quality, scientists will be directed to publish only in journals in the Directory of Open Access Journals.

In the meantime, MDPI has appointed two new editors-in-chief at *Nutrients*, who Vazquez says will “maintain the high quality of the journal.” As for Buckley, he thinks he has been “kind of naive,” assuming he would be able to lead a high-quality open-access journal owned by a commercial publisher. He believes that academic societies are better suited to setting up and managing open-access journals. “They will not be interested in the number of papers and don’t have other interests than the journal editors.”

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