

Letter to the Editor

PUBLISH AND STILL PERISH?

I would like to draw your readers' attention to an issue that has arisen regarding the rules on 'prior publication' and how these are implemented. Academic journals are generally loath to re-publish material that has already been published, although this is sometimes acceptable as long as there is appropriate attribution. Some journals extend this ban to media coverage ahead of publication (the Ingelfinger Rule). This has the merit of discouraging authors from seeking media coverage for findings before these have been subject to full peer review. However, the pre-publication and media release rules can work against transparent and effective science communication, as I think happened in the following case.

In 2014 my research team began breathalysing people as they entered some of the night-time entertainment districts (NEDs) in Queensland, Australia. As one can imagine, we were very visible, and media interest led to filming of our researchers in the public space. This media interest grew after a new State government initiative introduced law changes that led to the earlier closing of nightclubs. A planned 1 a.m. lockout was also scheduled, although this has since been abandoned. Before the legislative changes came into effect, our research [1] had found that the vast majority of youth entering the NEDs had pre-loaded (79%), and these pre-loaders had a mean breath (blood estimated) alcohol concentration of 0.071%. We had reason to fear that this pre-loading would increase when the nightclubs began closing earlier. The chief investigators of our research are an academic and a police officer and one of our research goals was to engage with the community over this issue, and so we thought it appropriate to speak to newspapers and television crews about what we were doing as we were collecting our data. This demystified our presence in the NEDs, and I believe it also minimized the refusal rate when people were approached to take part in the research.

We subsequently submitted a large paper reporting our findings to the *Medical Journal of Australia*, and this was eventually accepted as a 500-word research summary. Edits were made and galley proofs were approved. We were later surprised to receive notice that, during the process of commissioning an editorial on our work, it had been

brought to the editor's attention 'by a third party' that some of the findings had already been discussed in the media and this constituted 'prior publication'. The journal, therefore, cancelled publication of our study report.

We appealed this decision, as the scientific findings had not been presented in the media, but this was dismissed and our offer to debate the wider (current) issue within the journal was also declined.

I believe this is an issue which needs further discussion. It seems wrong that, after a study is completed, the only public mention of it is in the media rather than a peer-reviewed journal. While we need to discourage researchers from making claims in the media without scholarly evidence that has been subject to appropriate peer review [2], there is a problem when we refuse to publish the peer-reviewed findings using media engagement as the excuse. In that event, only a potentially inaccurate presentation exists in the public space. As espoused by Mill [3], a society which is open to debate is better served than one where the conventions are set by 'absolute princes, or others who are accustomed to unlimited deference'.

While some may claim that Mill erred in his libertarian approach, I believe it is necessary for science to thrive.

Declaration of interests

None.

Keywords Alcohol legislation, field research, freedom of publication, journal responsibilities, media, pre-loading.

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