

CORRESPONDENCE

COVID-19 and the need for stringent rules on data sharing

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To the Editor,

Recently, two top medical journals, The New England Journal of Medicine (1) and The Lancet (2), retracted two COVID-19 papers for not providing raw data (3). The papers were retracted when a US healthcare analytics company, Surgisphere, involved in conducting the said studies refused to provide the raw data for validation purposes. The data validation was important as the authors had claimed to have conducted a cutting edge research on the antimalarial and antihypertensive drugs for COVID-19 patients which caused the WHO and other international healthcare agencies to revise their COVID-19 treatment policies. COVID-19 outbreak has already seen multiple similar retractions and flip-flops on various relevant issues (4). A mandatory requirement of data sharing or even a request for the primary data used in these studies prior to publication for validation could possibly have prevented the publication of the questioned papers, and would not have influenced the policy makers.

Most of the reputed journals these days encourage authors to share the primary data and other documents in support of their observations during the manuscript submission process, so that it may be available to the reviewers for testing the validity and reproducibility of the findings. The authors are also encouraged to submit the data in the available data repositories, web link of which can be shared. This request for data during the submission process, however, is optional and not mandatory. Publication of wrong or

fraudulent research can have far reaching effects on the system, it is related to. Such incidents require urgent attention, and should be learning for the future. In view of the possibility of unintended lapses and misinterpretations of findings, or intentional misrepresentation of facts by the authors, it is very pertinent for the journals to mandatorily ask the authors for sharing of the primary data. This will ensure data integrity and transparency of the research findings, and help in negating the publication frauds. Even an independent audit/ review of the data can be conducted where ever required to reaffirm the findings. Data sharing most importantly will be a sort of confirmation that validated observations are passed on to the readers including the policy makers.

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