Predatory Conferences in the Field of Ayurveda and Alternative Medicine: Need for Quality Checks

As the research journals in Ayurveda and allied disciplines have increased in number, so have conferences. At face value, this trend appears to be desirable because both conferences and research journals serve as valuable channels for exchange of information amongst researchers. However, neither conferences nor journals can serve this purpose unless standard quality parameters are met to ensure that they are well structured and organized effectively.

There is growing awareness about predatory research journals.[1] Similarly, conferences can also be fraudulent and predatory. A researcher’s curriculum vitae needs to be enriched with publications in research journals and participation in conferences. This leads to a pressure and make them vulnerable to both predatory journals as well as such conferences.[2]

Scientific conferences and research journals are important platforms for researchers to disseminate their research work and also to get updated about new developments in a particular field. For a young researcher, a conference often provides the first exposure to obtain crucial feedback from the peers in the field. For a conference to be really useful, the participation, presence and availability of peers in the field is crucial for their research work to be reviewed and commented upon. In fact, an abstract submitted to a conference goes through two stages of peer review. In the first stage, the submitted abstracts are sent to reviewers who evaluate and select the abstracts that meet certain criteria. There are many challenges in this stage of peer review. Unlike full research papers, the reviewers have to judge the quality of the research work by reading an abstract of 200 to 300 words. The authors need to ensure that they write an abstract that is brief and yet provides enough information for the reviewers to make a fair judgment. Especially in the field of Ayurveda, we find that many abstracts are poorly written and end up as an introduction rather than a complete summary of their study. A badly written abstract is more often the cause for rejection rather than the demerits of the study itself. Such abstracts do not even give an opportunity for the reviewer to assess the study in the first place. Structuring an abstract goes a long way in ensuring that the essential details are included. This will go a long way in ensuring an efficient review. While it can be extremely disappointing when an abstract is rejected, it is important that it is drafted meticulously in anticipation of challenges of peer review in a conference.

A good conference must also ensure quality of the review of the abstracts. Even if the authors submit a good abstract, fair selection depends on well conducted peer review.[3] Considering the fact that abstracts presented in conferences are likely to represent new research, the competence of the peer reviewers in the particular field is critical. For a conference, just the quality of the abstract will not suffice. The relevance of the abstract to the theme of the conference is also important. The author has to take all these factors into consideration and have the right expectations while submitting an abstract.

The process of selection of an abstract is not so transparent even in good conferences. This is because, almost always, there is no chance for the author to receive feedback from the reviewers and submit a revised abstract. Authors can end up being frustrated without knowing exactly why their abstracts were rejected. Therefore, a meticulous peer review process has to be put into place for the fair selection of the abstracts.

Good conferences usually also publish the selected abstracts as a supplement in a peer reviewed journal. In such cases, the journal is likely to be involved in the initial peer review of the abstracts because all selected abstracts will have to be included in the supplement.

The real value of a conference for a young researcher who presents his abstract is that s/he can get live feedback from peers and even interact with individual experts. This process helps the researcher to obtain critical inputs prior to the publication of the full paper. Good conferences must have a mechanism to facilitate the interaction between researchers and experts so that this exchange takes place. It is quite a challenge even in conferences conducted with good intentions to not only have the critical numbers as audience, but to have the right people in the audience who can provide critical feedback.

Creating a platform for young researchers to present the preliminary results of their new research is one of the major goals of a scientific or research conference. However, an equally important function of a good conference is to bring seasoned and leading researchers in the field to share their research experiences. It is an altogether different experience to hear about the research and its outcomes directly from the person who did it. It is even more educative to know about the challenges and difficulties as well as the journey of the researcher, which cannot be obtained by just reading a published paper. Good conferences create a confluence of experts who can kick-start new thought processes in the minds of other researchers and kindle creativity. To top it all, conferences facilitate networking amongst scientists working within and across disciplines.
It was Jeffrey Beall who coined the term “predatory meetings” corresponding to “predatory publications.” While there has been increased awareness about “predatory publications” in the field of Ayurveda in recent times, there is not as much awareness about “predatory conferences.”

Predatory conferences accept poor quality submissions and prompt delegates to register in order to get their abstracts accepted. The abstracts are not even peer reviewed before acceptance. Novices in the academic field become easy prey to such initiatives. Such conferences list names of individuals in the committees without even obtaining consent. Even eminent speakers are listed without prior intimation and may not actually participate in the conference. Predatory conferences also publish abstracts in predatory journals and at the surface, it is difficult to distinguish the good from the bad for the average young researcher.[4]

Fraudulent conferences have nurtured a very unhealthy attitude amongst young scholars in the field of Ayurveda and I have personally had to deal with delegates who demand refund of registration fees when their abstracts are rejected. Even when registration is not at all a criterion for submission of abstract. The slogan seems to be “accept abstract or refund fee”! Such experiences are a clear indication that soliciting abstracts is for the sole purpose of enhancing conference attendance and that organisers are willing to accept abstracts without peer review if authors are willing to pay registration fees.

The World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology as well as the OMICS Publishing Group have been well recognised as organisers of predatory conferences. In 2016, the Federal Trade Commission even launched a case against OMICS.[5]

The key characteristics of predatory conferences are speedy acceptance of abstracts without peer review, acceptance of abstracts which do not have any substance, coaxing authors to pay high fees when their abstracts are accepted, listing experts in committees without their consent and not removing their names even on request, and mimicking well established conferences.

It is a matter of concern and alarm that not only young researchers but also senior academicians in the field of Ayurveda are being hoodwinked by organisers of predatory conferences. More than often, I have witnessed colleagues proudly announcing in social media their inclusion as distinguished resource persons in OMICS conferences. It is also a disturbing fact that a majority of academicians in the field of Ayurveda cannot identify even a fraudulent journal inviting them to serve on the editorial board showering praises on their academic achievements.

Another matter of concern is that in the field of Ayurveda we have another category of conferences which cannot be labelled as predatory in the true sense though in some respects they create the same effect. These are the poorly conducted conferences, where the high standards and quality control are not enforced with the intention of making a profit, but due to incompetence and lack of proper planning and execution. The result is the same. We fail to cultivate the spirit of science and scientific research in the academia.

Conferences provide the preparatory platform for research publications in journals. Research conferences and journals represent one continuum and while we become so eloquent about the poor quality of research journals in Ayurveda, we must realise that the first lessons of peer reviewing and scientific communication are learnt by participating in good conferences.

The time has become ripe to enforce quality checks for research conferences in the field of Ayurveda. Such a step will go a long way in also sensitising the academia about the peril of predatory journals. Good conferences can nurture scientific spirit in the Ayurvedic community and eventually transform the quality of Ayurvedic publications in the long run.

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