

Medical studies without adequate pre-publication review could damage public trust in science

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The public could lose trust in science if scientific and medical

researchers choose to bypass the traditional high standards of peer-reviewed medical journals in the rush to get research data released, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

That's the warning from three leading medical communications organizations, that have published a joint statement in the peer-reviewed journal *Current Medical Research and Opinion*—asserting that the integrity of published scientific and [medical research](#) must be protected.

Out today, the joint statement from the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA), and the International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP), argues that although peer-[review](#) is still the most common process for vetting [scientific publications](#), there is a worrying trend for manuscripts to be released without pre-publication review.

Especially during the COVID-19 health crisis, medical researchers have felt significant pressure to publish COVID-19 findings as quickly as possible, but the statement emphasizes that having a pre-publication review is still essential. The danger is that once the threshold of publication oversight is lowered, it becomes a precedent that cannot be easily reversed, potentially eroding standards and causing the [public](#) to lose trust in medical science. "Medical communicators, including writers, editors, and those involved in quality control, play a critical role in ensuring that clinical and [scientific data](#) are published and disseminated in an accurate and clear manner. In the current rush-to-publish environment, all stakeholders in the scientific and clinical research communities and press must ensure that the public have correct and actionable information from which to make health and medical decisions," explained Gail Flores, Ph.D., President of AMWA.

In particular, the statement highlights the impact of preprints—preliminary scientific reports that are made publicly available

online for anyone to read and discuss before they have been peer reviewed. While preprints enable rapid release and discussion of data, many are never revised or corrected, and only about a third-to-a half are ever fully published. This can also occur with articles submitted for post-publication peer review, in which an article is published in its original form, before expert peer reviewers are invited to critique it.

The statement recognizes the benefit of rapid publication but alerts that they have to be vetted against the potential harms associated with an accelerated process. "Particularly in these times, it is more important than ever to retain public trust in science, while balancing the need to report timely and relevant medical research," stated Beatrix Doerr, Ph.D., President of EMWA. In seeking a resolution, the three organizations present recommendations and a Reviewers' Checklist to provide a minimum standard of pre-publication vetting to enhance preprint publication processes.

Their key recommendations include:

- Performing more extensive and consistent checks— for example, by preprint server hosts —on articles that have not been peer-reviewed prior to publication.
- Referencing preprints and articles uploaded for post-publication peer-review only as in-text reference (with a preprint link, DOI, or both), rather than as a bibliographic reference, and clearly labelled as a [preprint](#), or as undergoing post-publication peer review.
- Watermarking articles plus including a disclosure within the body of the article highlighting that the findings have not been formally peer-reviewed.
- Educating medical journalists and the public about the differences between preprints, post-publication peer review, and traditional peer review.

Crucially, the organizations have also identified ways in which the peer-review process—renowned for being "laborious and time-consuming"—could be expedited. They call upon each stakeholder—authors, journal editors, and publishers—to play a part in this. Their key suggestions include:

- Rapid response team of reviewers
- Standardized formatting requirements to shorten the time to re-submission
- Portable peer-review
- Fast-track options
- Incentives for reviewers

"For those engaged in preprints, post-publication peer-review, as well as traditional peer-review publications, our joint statement presents key practical recommendations to safeguard the quality of the publications while supporting their more rapid dissemination. We strongly encourage authors, journal editors, publishers, and other stakeholders to review and apply these practical suggestions, ensuring a high-quality standard for published research, irrespective of the format," emphasized Robert J. Matheis, Ph.D., MA, President and CEO of ISMPP.

More information: et al, AMWA-EMWA-ISMPP joint position statement on medical publications, preprints, and peer review, *Current Medical Research and Opinion* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/03007995.2021.1900365](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007995.2021.1900365)

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