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Duplicate publications of the same trial



Duplicate publications of the results of the same clinical trial can create the false impression that they refer to different studies (1). In theory, major biomedical journals only accept duplicate publication of articles in another language or another country, on condition that the original publication is clearly mentioned on the first page (2).

A team of anaesthetists found that the conclusions of a systematic review were appreciably modified when duplicate publications were excluded (1,3). They decided to further investigate this phenomenon (4).

A frequent practice. The team examined 141 systematic review articles published in English between 1989 and 2002, dealing with perioperative procedures such as anaesthesia, analgesia and intensive care. In 56 of these review articles, which covered a total of 1234 publications, they identified 78 original publications that were 'duplicated' between one and four times, resulting in a total of 181 multiple publications (4).

Thirteen of these 78 publications had been published again in another language, which is acceptable, but only one of the translations drew readers' attention to the fact that the translated article was not the original publication. In total, 65 duplicate publications were difficult to identify as such, and sometimes the confusion was deliberate (4).

Two-thirds of duplicate articles were published within two years after the original article, and 6% were published more than four years later (4).

One-third of the duplicate publications had been sponsored by the pharma-

ceutical industry. There was no significant difference between original and duplicate publications in terms of the journals' reputation (i.e. impact factor) or the number of citations per year (4).

Astonishingly, in 44 of the 103 cases the conclusions of the duplicate publication differed from those of the original!

A critical mind. Multiple publications of the same study are often motivated by a researcher's desire to artificially extend his or her list of publications, part of the 'publish or perish' syndrome.

This tendency could be discouraged, at least in part, if researchers were judged on the quality rather than on the number of their publications (5). Journal editors should also be more vigilant (a).

Another reminder never to take things at face value!

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a- A few months after publishing the anaesthetists' study, JAMA unintentionally published results that had already appeared 4 years earlier in another journal (refs 6,7).

Selected references from Prescrire's literature search.

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- 3- Tramer M et al. "Impact of covert duplicate publication on meta-analysis: a case study" *BMJ* 1997; 315: 635-640.
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- 5- Brochard L "Redundant publications, or piling up the medals. Getting published is not the Olympic Games" *Intensive Care Med* 2004; 30: 1857-1858.
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