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Forgive me this “seaside” editorial but, if we do not digress a bit in July, when should we do it? Let’s discuss a topic that everyone knows and very few talk about. What is the action that most of us perform every day automatically, over and over again, without thinking too much? Yes, correct, I’m talking about the cancellation of the countless unsolicited, non-legitimate e-mails which have accumulated overnight and during the day. The phenomenon of medically themed spam began gently a few years ago and has progressively reached unsustainable proportions. I do not know how many of you have ever read these e-mails from A to Z, so seductive in promising high-impact publications with a large overall reach. If you have never done so, then you have missed wonderful peaks of creativity. Here are my top five favourite types of spam e-mail in the academic field.

Fifth position: those that have nothing to do with your specialty of interest

“We are pleased to invite you to submit your valuable research work in the (random non-cardiological) journal”. Thank you, sirs, your pleasure in inviting me is nothing compared to my pleasure in receiving twenty other e-mails of this kind every day. Typically, these journals try to attract the recipient with a list of newly accepted articles, which have nothing in common with disciplines even remotely or vaguely related to each other. “The Influence of the Tannic Acid on the Expression of the Connexins 45 in a Rat Kidney Damaged by the Chronic Hyperglycaemia” is

certainly a respectable theme, but not exactly what I would call “my cup of tea”.

Fourth position: those who think they are very smart

The devil is in the detail, to quote an old saying. Indeed, once that first and quite legitimate pride of being invited to contribute to a scientific (?) journal has died down, the critical eye begins to look at the fine print and consider the rip-off. In fact, it must be said that these e-mails are always similar, so it is not that difficult to separate the useful from the useless. However, any distraction can be fatal. It goes without saying that most of these journals are not indexed, typically fake, and have no review process. Clicking the link by which you access the journal’s page on its charge policy, a world of tax after tax is revealed. In practice, not only is the journal unknown and perhaps even non-existent, but also the article’s topic is a shameless pretext. Even given (but not granted) that the article is finally written by a valiant fellow desiring to build his curriculum vitae, to publish it he or she will still have to borrow the equivalent of a mortgage.

Third position: those who invite you to write a book

Who has never wanted to write a bestseller? Some publishers give you the chance. Obviously, you have to write the whole index by yourself, and this is okay. Then you have to identify the authors of

Based on a hilarious but rigorous study, spamming of academic invitations “is common, repetitive, often irrelevant, and difficult to avoid or prevent”³. The relatively simple action of unsubscribing is possible but also almost meaningless: in the study, it reduced the frequency of the invitations by 39% after one month but by only 19% after one year. Jokes and studies apart, there is clearly a serious side to this matter. The goal of these daily spamming e-mails from questionable, “predatory” journals or websites is to mislead academics, particularly if they are at the start of their career, with the deliberate purpose of earning money through unethical practices⁴. Not only are these e-mails frustrating but they are also sometimes the gatekeeper for fraudulent phishing. Particularly in the “publish or perish” era (where pressure exists to publish academic research to sustain a career),

the phenomenon of academic spamming is not only annoying but also worrisome. This is a call for action from competent authorities.

References

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