

China probes academic fraud by cancer researchers

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China is investigating claims of academic fraud involving mostly Chinese cancer researchers after more than 100 articles were withdrawn from a foreign medical journal.

German publisher Springer announced in April the retraction of 107 articles from Tumor Biology after finding evidence the "peer review process was compromised".

The papers had been produced by Chinese medical institutions and universities and published between 2012 and 2016.

It is standard practise for scholars to submit their research to peers for scrutiny before publishing to ensure the integrity of their work, but fraud is a growing problem.

China's Ministry of Science and Technology said it had "zero tolerance" for such behaviour and pledged to investigate "each and every paper retracted".

Researchers involved in the mass retraction have had their projects and funding suspended, it added.

"The incident has had a very bad influence, seriously tarnishing the international reputation of China's scientific circle and hurting the self-esteem of Chinese scientists," the ministry said Wednesday.

"But it also shows we need to strengthen punishment for academic fraud and to improve the academic atmosphere."

The blog Retraction Watch said it had been told by Springer that "the reviews were submitted under the names of real researchers with faked emails. Some of the authors may have used a third-party editing service, which may have supplied the reviews."

Tumor Biology is now published by SAGE Publications in the United States.

It is not the first time Chinese medical experts have been caught faking peer reviews—in 2015 London-based BioMed Central pulled 43 articles, which the Global Times said were mostly by Chinese researchers.

In 2016 Springer retracted 64 articles from 10 journals, many written by Chinese contributors, the newspaper added.

The latest incident highlighted the pressure on Chinese doctors in public hospitals to "publish a certain number of papers in national or international journals just to secure promotion or salary rises", Xinhua news agency said.

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