In 2016, BioMed Central (BMC), a leading open-access publisher, retracted 58 Iranian articles due to alleged peer review and authorship manipulations. The next year, PubMed Central (PMC) reevaluated and discontinued archiving of 14 Iranian journals, which failed to meet the “scientific and editorial standards” of the global digital repository. Later on, Elsevier retracted 26 Iranian articles, which were mostly authored by the same physicist, due to “peer-review manipulations” and “unexplained authorship irregularities,” and Wiley pulled 13 articles of an Iranian ichthyologist over “concerns about faked peer review.” Although such unfortunate incidents take place globally, Iranian scholars could escape the latest grim allegations by adhering to the global and local editorial guidance.

In this article, possible reasons behind the revealed Iranian cases of publication ethics violations are analyzed and recommendations are brought forward to avoid similar wrongdoings in the future. The bottom line of the presented opinion is that ethical transgressions in peer review and publishing are not limited to any single country and should be prevented by joint efforts of all parties involved in science communication.

Known for its glorious scientific past and inventions that changed mankind, Iran has been experiencing a remarkable leap in medical research and academic output for the last forty years. Arguably, the last monumental contribution of Persians to the global medical science was the Canon of Medicine by Avicenna (1052 AD), which remained the only indisputable textbook for centuries.

Owing to the spectacular scientific growth, the number of Iranian medical journals increased from 8 in 1979 to 146 in 2009; and Iran ranked first among all Islamic countries in terms of published scientific papers and attracted citations in 2015. The fact that more than 45,000 scientific reports from Iran are indexed in Scopus annually points to the existence of favorable research and editing infrastructure in the country. The fastest growth of science is even more impressive in view of the crippling sanctions that were imposed on the country during the last forty years and that severely affected numerous social and economic sectors. Inevitably, the same sanctions shake the foundations of Iranian research infrastructure and threaten ethical priority setting.

Disadvantaged competitiveness and inadequate supervision of research and publishing severely affect the quality of the local scholarly output. Iranian experts suggested that expanding international collaboration and promoting globally accepted principles of the
academic workflow can solve most problems in the field of scientific research. In line with these suggestions, educating Iranian authors about globally acceptable authorship criteria may prevent numerous cases of inappropriate behavior in the field of scholarly publishing.

The pressure to publish for academic promotion is yet another factor behind various forms of misconduct among Iranian authors. The early-career researchers are particularly vulnerable, and often commit wrongdoings, in the times of crediting prolific and highly competitive scholars. Again, the pressure to publish more at all costs is not confined to Iran; various forms of fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism are committed by individuals all over the world.

It is argued that high-rank medical practitioners and administrators are also likely to commit fraud in research. Their numerous clinical and executive duties leave little or no time and energy for precise research activities, which are mandatory for academic promotion. Medical practitioners are also disadvantaged in that as they do not pass advanced courses of research methodology and academic English to avoid “unintentional plagiarism.”

The hesitancy of Iranian academics to expose and punish unethical colleagues can be another reason for the mass violations of research and publication ethics. This attitude stems from deep-rooted social and cultural factors related to the concerns over the devastating consequences of the exposure for dishonest researchers and the absence of immediate benefits for the research infrastructure. Iranians do not consider it fair to expose and punish colleagues, and particularly high-rank scholars, for wrongdoings that do not have immediate negative effects on others. Forgiveness and concealment of wrongdoings are traditional values that are constantly highlighted in the Persian literature. Therefore, the traditional tolerance and respect of scholars, even those who violate ethical norms, can be a powerful factor behind the local cases of corruption in research and publishing.

The reluctance of reviewers, editors, and publishers to process and publish articles with negative results can boost research misconduct and manipulations in Iran and elsewhere in the world. The sanctions imposed on Iran have additionally changed the system of supply; Iranian researchers are now relying heavily on imported disposable materials and equipment. With numerous reagents, laboratory tools, and research devices being irrationally expensive in the country, local researchers face difficulties with conducting high-tech experiments and end up with negative results, limiting the chance of publishing their works.

To sum up, Iranian researchers face numerous hurdles, directly or indirectly attributable to the sanctions. There are some shortages of research materials and high-tech equipment. Iranian scholars face some difficulties with attending abroad meetings and arranging local scientific and educational programs. There are also concerns over the growing bias of the global scholarly community toward Iranian authors and their works. Nonetheless, Iranian researchers withstand all the pressures and aim to achieve more both nationally and internationally.

Some of the problems in research and publishing can be overcome by regularly arranged research and publication ethics courses, by exchange visiting programs for researchers, and collaborative research projects with the support of highly-skilled international scholars.
REFERENCES