Scientific integrity and reliable sources: the *Revista Brasileira de Saúde Materno Infantil* will no longer accept citations from journals and publishers suspected of predatory practices

Scientific integrity is undergoing an unprecedented crisis. The exponential rise in retractions, the proliferation of paper mills, and the erosion of peer-review mechanisms pose real threats to the credibility of the scientific enterprise. The *Revista Brasileira de Saúde Materno Infantil* (RBSMI) has been closely following this crisis, having published in 2025 two Points of View dedicated to the subject: Amorim and Bacchi[1] examined the implications of mass retractions and editorial vulnerabilities, while Alves and Procianoy[2] discussed the ethical dimensions of scientific publishing. This editorial goes one step further: the formalization of an editorial policy that, from 2026 onward, prohibits the citation of journals and publishers suspected of predatory practices in manuscripts published by the RBSMI.

Predatory publishers, or those suspected of predatory practices, operate under a business model that prioritizes publication volume and revenue from article processing charges (APC) over rigor in peer review. The most frequent argument in their defense is their indexing in prestigious databases such as PubMed, suggesting that such indexing would, in itself, constitute an indicator of quality. This premise is fallacious. PubMed is a repository of biomedical literature maintained by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) whose inclusion criteria assess formal aspects — scope, regularity, format, and declared peer review — but do not systematically audit the quality or integrity of the editorial process of each indexed journal.[3] Likewise, presence in Scopus or Web of Science does not guarantee that all published articles have undergone rigorous peer review.

The de-indexing of 19 journals from Web of Science in 2023[4] and the downgrading of 271 journals from major publishers in 2024[5] clearly illustrate that indexing and quality are distinct dimensions.

Beall's List[6] names publishers and journals whose practices raise concern, and it is constantly updated with the inclusion or exclusion of journals deemed suspect.[5] A critical reading of articles by researchers, and the constant need to search for possible published retractions, should be regarded as an routine practice, so as to prevent incorrect conclusions from being disseminated and taken as truth. Unfortunately, numerous articles are retracted daily around the world.[7]

The problem is not confined to the journals in which authors publish, but necessarily extends to the sources they use to underpin their research. A systematic review that includes studies from journals with compromised peer review undermines its own conclusions. A randomized clinical trial that cites data originating from paper mills compromises the chain of evidence. In an era of transparency and the pursuit of scientific integrity, the RBSMI understands that it is not enough to ensure the quality of the articles it publishes: it is also necessary to safeguard the quality of the sources those articles cite. Citing unreliable sources in a scientific article is tantamount to erecting a building on unstable foundations — the structure may appear solid, but its support is illusory.

In this context, the RBSMI adopts, from 2026 onward, the following editorial policy: citations of journals published by publishers suspected of predatory practices will not be accepted. The prohibition applies equally to other publishers identified in internationally recognized watchlists, such as Beall's List[6] and Cabells Predatory Reports.[8] All reviewers and associate editors will receive these updated lists, and citations of articles originating from predatory journals or publishers will be returned to authors with a request for their omission or replacement.

We acknowledge that this decision is not free of controversy. Some individual journals from these publishers publish work of reasonable quality, and good-faith researchers may have published their work in these venues. However, when a publisher as a whole displays questionable editorial standards in a recurrent and systemic manner, it becomes impractical — and imprudent — to assess case by case each of its hundreds of journals. The institutional decision not to accept these sources is, therefore, a measure to protect the scientific integrity of the articles published in the RBSMI.

To implement this policy, the RBSMI relies on a multi-layered verification system. In the first instance, the Associate Editors and reviewers are instructed to identify citations of sources originating from publishers suspected of predatory practices during manuscript assessment, requesting that authors replace them with references from journals whose editorial process is demonstrably sound. Should this verification not occur in the first round of review, the manuscript will undergo the second layer of analysis: review by the Editor-in-Chief and the Executive Editors, who will verify the conformity of the references with the editorial policy in force.

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Finally, the bibliographic review carried out by the RBSMI's assistant editor, a mandatory step prior to publication, constitutes the third and final layer of verification, ensuring that no reference from a prohibited source reaches the published article. We emphasize that the authors of the present editorial (Editor-in-Chief and Executive Editors) occasionally submit manuscripts to the RBSMI as authors; in such cases, the assessment process strictly follows the regular flow via Associate Editors and external reviewers, in accordance with the guidelines of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)[9] for the publication of editors in their own journals, eliminating any conflict of interest.

This new policy is part of a broader set of measures that the RBSMI has been implementing in favor of scientific integrity, including the introduction of text-similarity screening for manuscripts accepted for publication, the formulation of guidelines for the ethical and transparent use of artificial intelligence in scientific research, the strengthening of the conflict-of-interest policy, and the effective requirement of compliance with international reporting guidelines (Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology – STROBE, Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials – CONSORT, Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses – PRISMA, among others), now verified systematically during the peer-review process.

The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)[10] reminds us that the quality of an article must be judged on its own merit, not by the impact factor of the journal in which it was published. Applying this same logic symmetrically, we understand that the quality of the sources cited in a manuscript must be assessed by the reliability of their editorial processes, not by their mere presence in indexed databases.

We therefore call upon the Associate Editors, reviewers, and authors of the RBSMI — and of all journals worldwide — to incorporate this guideline into their practices. We ask authors to review their reference lists before submission, replacing sources originating from publishers suspected of predatory practices with publications from journals whose editorial processes are recognized as robust. We ask reviewers and Associate Editors for active vigilance in identifying such sources during assessment.

If the integrity of an article depends on the soundness of its sources — and the entire argument of this editorial holds that it does — then the policy formalized here, though necessary, is by definition circumscribed. It falls to this journal not only to implement its own safeguards but to call upon the other scientific journals to adopt analogous measures, refusing publications originating from publishers suspected of predatory practices.

As urgent as the action of journals, however, is the responsibility of the major indexing databases — PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science — and of the bodies that confer impact metrics. As long as these publishers remain indexed, displaying seemingly legitimate impact factors, early-career researchers — and, not infrequently, experienced ones as well — will continue to be drawn to publish in them, in a cycle that feeds on itself precisely because indexing lends to that which lacks quality the appearance of having it.

Breaking this vicious circle requires collective action: periodic review of inclusion criteria in the databases, exclusion of journals that fail to meet minimum standards of editorial integrity, and the conscious, systematic refusal by the scientific community to cite, submit to, and legitimize what does not withstand scrutiny.

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Melania Maria Ramos Amorim [1,3]
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1047-2514

Lygia Carmen de Moraes Vanderlei [2,3]
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3610-3699

Alex Sandro Rolland Souza [3,4,5]
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7039-2052

[1] *Stricto Sensu* Graduate Programme in Integral Health. Instituto de Medicina Integral Prof. Fernando Figueira. Rua dos Coelhos, 300. Boa Vista. Recife, PE, Brazil. CEP: 50.070-902. E-mail: profmelania.amorim@gmail.com
[2] *Stricto Sensu* Graduate Programme in Health Evaluation. Instituto de Medicina Integral Prof. Fernando Figueira. Recife, PE, Brazil.
[3] *Stricto Sensu* Graduate Programme in Integral Health. Instituto de Medicina Integral Prof. Fernando Figueira. Recife, PE, Brazil.
[4] School of Health and Life Sciences. Universidade Católica de Pernambuco. Recife, PE, Brazil.
[5] Academic Division of Gynaecology and Obstetrics. Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. Recife, PE, Brazil.