

# Addressing Helicopter Research: Journal Policies for Equitable Collaborations

## MODERATOR:

**Mia Ricci**

American Geophysical Union

## SPEAKERS:

**James Kigera**

Annals of African Surgery

**Sowmya Swamiathan**

Springer Nature

**George Vousden**

PLOS

**Margaret Lartey**

Ghana Medical Journal

## REPORTER:

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Origin Editorial

The “Addressing Helicopter Research: Journal Policies for Equitable Collaborations” session highlighted the role that scientific journals play in helping address the growing concerns over “helicopter research” (also known as “parachute research” or “parachute science”), which is defined as the act of high-income researchers conducting research in resource-poor settings or with groups who are historically marginalized with little-to-no involvement from those communities or local researchers in the research process or publication of results.<sup>1</sup> The panel comprised speakers representing both the researcher and publisher perspective on parachute science.

As the first speaker of the session, James Kigera, MD, MMed, Editor-in-Chief (EIC) of the *Annals of African Surgery*, shared the results of a readership survey of his journal. *Annals* readers are predominately African surgeons and academic scientists. Results showed that 50% of respondents had encountered helicopter research, which included unacknowledged contributions of local researchers and community members of study design and data collection, logistical support, and review of results. Dr Kigera cited the disparities of institutional size and income between the visiting and local researchers as the source of this unacknowledged contribution. He offered several solutions to help address helicopter science, including local institutions being mindful in their choice of international partners and having well-defined memoranda of understanding, to ensure local scientists and community members are properly included, consulted, and acknowledged; using ethics boards to ensure the research is monitored; and educating journals on how to detect helicopter research and reject it.

Following Dr Kigera was Margaret Lartey, MBChB, MSc, MPH, deputy EIC of the *Ghana Medical Journal*, who discussed

a personal experience she had with helicopter science in 2010. At the time, she was the head of the infectious diseases unit at a large teaching hospital in Ghana. Researchers from a New York-based institution were interested in studying the hospital's patients with HIV. These researchers lacked a proposal and clearance by an ethics board but claimed to have been given permission to conduct their research at the hospital by the provost of the college of health sciences (this turned out to be untrue). Study participants were asked to complete a 4–5-hour questionnaire containing more than 200 questions, causing them to be fatigued and frustrated. The researchers refused to shorten the questionnaire. Within 2 weeks, they had left the hospital and returned to New York, at which point they asked Dr Lartey if she wanted to be an author—an offer she declined.

Like Dr Kigera, Dr Lartey offered several recommendations for how research institutions and publishers or editors can address helicopter research. For research institutions in low-to-middle income countries (LMIC), they must be more assertive and insist that proper research procedures are followed by the visiting scientists. Additionally, researchers in LMICs must be empowered to refuse helicopter research. For all countries, regardless of resources, there must be a stronger emphasis on ethics and monitoring bodies to ensure the research is ethically and appropriately conducted. Publishers and editors can develop policies to prevent helicopter research being submitted or published in journals and can also develop screening mechanisms to detect such science. Dr Lartey concluded her presentation by suggesting that the Committee on Publication Ethics should consider designating helicopter research as research misconduct.

George Vousden, PhD, deputy EIC of *PLOS ONE*, was the next speaker. He explained why *PLOS ONE* developed a policy on helicopter research—the journal has a global author and reader base, both of which could be affected by helicopter science, and the journal strives to achieve inclusivity, choice, credit, and transparency. Additionally, *PLOS ONE* published a clinical trial that was conducted without local authors—calls for retraction were made, but because the journal didn't have a policy yet, it was difficult to heed those calls. In researching how other journals addressed helicopter research, *PLOS ONE* realized that few journals had policies on this issue. Dr Vousden also acknowledged that it's challenging for journals to immediately impact research practices around helicopter science; when a manuscript has been submitted to a journal,

<https://doi.org/10.36591/SE-D-4603-07>

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the opportunity has already passed to engage with the local community.

In developing its policy, *PLOS ONE* consulted those affected by helicopter research, as well as representatives from various disciplines, including public health, medicine, and environmental studies, among others. The journal then developed a set of questions that authors complete at the revision stage to help staff and editors detect helicopter research, with the policy<sup>2</sup> applying when the last or corresponding author is from a different country or community than where the research was conducted. Dr Vousden then gave an example of the policy in action. He shared that the policy has been applied to 2% of submissions in *PLOS ONE*, authors have responded positively to the policy, and several other journals have since launched helicopter-research policies. Notably, *eLife*<sup>3</sup> adopted PLOS's policy in April 2023. Dr Vousden concluded his talk by explaining that combating helicopter research will take a combined effort of authors, publishers, and funders (Figure).

The final presentation of the session was from Sowmya Swaminathan, PhD, Head of Collaborations & Chair, Springer Nature Research & Solutions DEI Program. Dr Swaminathan explained that the *Nature* Portfolio's commitment to addressing helicopter research stems from the fact that journals can affect change in the research ecosystem. She



**Figure.** Authors, publishers, and funders will need to collaborate to combat helicopter research.

cited a recent editorial<sup>1</sup> in *Nature* that illustrates the journal's new framework around helicopter science, which is guided by the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings.<sup>4</sup> This Code of Conduct was developed by TRUST—a European Union-funded project on research ethics and is discipline agnostic, focusing on the values of fairness, respect, and care. The development of the Code of Conduct included consultation with various groups, including funders, policy groups, and research organizations and has been adopted by both funders and research organizations.

*Nature* Portfolio journals have integrated their guidance into the author and editor workflows, with the goals of increasing awareness, transparency, and improving citation diversity, and inclusion in peer review. Authors are encouraged to include an optional "Inclusion & Ethics Statement" with their manuscripts; the journals provide a set of 10 prompts<sup>5</sup> drawn from the Global Code of Conduct to help authors with the development of such a statement. Some of the prompts include the following:

- Has the research included local researchers throughout the research process—study design, study implementation, data ownership, intellectual property and authorship of publications?
- Where appropriate, has the study been approved by a local ethics review committee? If not, please explain the reasons.
- Please indicate if you have taken local and regional research relevant to your study into account in citations.

The guidance has been positively received by authors.

The session concluded with questions from the audience around ethics dumping<sup>6</sup> and the use of CRediT<sup>7</sup> to help include authors from local communities.

## References and Links

1. *Nature* addresses helicopter research. *Nature*. 2022;606:7. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-01423-6>
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