

China targets fake peer reviews

Funding agencies announce harsh penalties and stronger policing efforts.

BY DAVID CYRANOSKI

The Chinese government is going on the offensive against scientists who dupe journals by creating fraudulent reviews of submitted papers. A coalition of agencies led by the science ministry announced on 14 June that the government would suspend the grants of researchers involved in such fraud, which surfaced earlier this year when a cancer journal retracted 107 research papers from Chinese authors. And funding agencies in China promised to increase policing of the scientific community to prevent similar deceptions.

The harsh penalties and stricter enforcement were decided earlier this month at a meeting of representatives of the science ministry, the health ministry, the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) and other agencies.

“To have so many agencies and so much

personnel work together on the problem of manuscript fabrication is, to my knowledge, unprecedented,” says Jiang Wenlai, a water-resources researcher at the Institute of Agri-

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cultural Resources and Regional Planning in Beijing, part of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences. The meeting was a response to retractions made in April by the journal *Tumor Biology*, after its publisher, Springer Nature, found that reviews submitted in support of 107 papers had been fabricated. (Springer Nature no longer publishes *Tumor Biology*. *Nature* is published by Springer Nature, and *Nature*’s News and Comment team is editorially independent of the publisher.)

Fraud in peer review is a global problem. It occurs when researchers — or companies acting on their behalf — suggest scientists as potential peer reviewers, but the e-mails supplied for the reviewers route back to the authors or the companies, who then write spurious reviews supporting publication.

Online companies that orchestrate fake peer review are among the main targets of the crackdown. The coalition hopes to enlist the government’s Cyberspace Administration of China, the agency that censors the Internet in China. It could identify the culprits behind the companies, says Yang Wei, head of the NSFC. “If you shut one [website] down, they will just open three others,” he says. “Our goal is to find the person behind them.”

The problem extends well beyond cancer research. “You can go online and see lots of them. Different fields are served by different companies,” says Yang. ■