

For the record

An unusually harsh decision was made in October by the editorial board and publisher of *Human Immunology*, the official journal of the American Society for Histocompatibility and Immunogenetics (ASHI). Editor-in-chief Nicole Suciú-Foca, a Columbia University Professor of clinical pathology, asked the publisher of the journal, Elsevier Sciences, Inc. to remove all electronic versions of one article that had been published in the September issue. In addition, at least one librarian received a letter requesting that he “physically remove the relevant pages” of *Human Immunology* and should consider the paper as “not having been published.”

The facts of the case are still emerging. But here is a synopsis of the information I have received so far from published sources and oral and written communications on why a journal has decided to expunge a published article from its archive.

Antonio Arnaiz-Villena of the Department of Immunology and Molecular Biology at the University of Complutense of Madrid, Spain accepted an invitation as visiting editor for the September issue of *Human Immunology*, a volume devoted to comparative population genetics. In his introductory editorial, Arnaiz-Villena stated that the study of genetic mutations could contribute to our understanding of the history of disease and generate hypotheses about the historic relationships among population groups.

Arnaiz-Villena was also lead author of a paper on the genetic relatedness of Palestinians to other Mediterranean populations. His research group used the human leukocyte antigen to study the genetic profile of Palestinians, comparing it to other population groups in the region. The study contained an introduction consisting of five paragraphs summarizing the history of occupation in the region of Israel and Palestine from the 3rd Millennium BC to the 20th Century.

Robert Lewis, of the ASHI Publications Committee, and Suciú-Foca issued a statement¹ in the October issue of the journal that the authors of the paper “confounded the elegant analysis of the historic basis of the people of the Mediterranean Basin with a political viewpoint representing only one side of a [sic] complex and political historical issues.” They deplored the “inappropriate use of a scientific journal for a political

agenda” and stated that the paper “has been deleted from the scientific literature.” The president of ASHI, Dolly B. Tyan, wrote in that issue² that the Society “condemns the use of a scientific forum to advance any bias,” and referred to the article as a “breach of scientific principle.” No details were given in either editorial about the content of the “alleged” bias of the authors leaving the readers, without a text to read, to speculate about the source of the controversy.

A news story³ in *Nature* reported that complaints received by *Human Immunology* were directed at “inappropriate political comments about Israeli–Palestinian conflict,” such as referring to Israelis living in the Gaza Strip as “colonists” and describing some Palestinians as living in “concentration camps.”

The decision by a journal’s editorial board and publisher to expunge the record of an existing published paper raises issues for the ethics of journal publication. Whereas it is not uncommon for scientific papers to be retracted by journals, traditionally, this has occurred when the author(s) cannot replicate or defend the results, when there is an error in a critical calculation or derivation, when there has been scientific fraud and misconduct, or (less frequently) when there has been a breach of ethical standards, as in the abuse of human subjects.

A lively debate among journal editors and librarians has focused on how to mark a paper that has been retracted, the use of a centralized registry, deleting the citations of retracted papers from electronic databases and removing papers from a journal’s archive. The conditions that define the draconian action taken by the editorial board of *Human Immunology* are unprecedented in journal publishing. I cannot find a similar example of a published paper retracted by a journal and also expunged from all electronic databases for allegedly inappropriate political language.

The editor-in-chief entrusted the guest editorship of the journal to a colleague. This trust carries certain responsibilities as well as editorial prerogatives. Once the journal is published and in print, if the editor-in-chief loses confidence in the guest editor on some of the published material, she can express her viewpoint in the next issue. By retracting the paper and removing it from all electronic databases and the journal’s electronic archive, the

journal has chosen the most punitive course of action it has at its disposal, an action which, if ever justifiable, should be reserved for the most serious transgressions, such as blatant scientific fraud and misconduct and not because a paper allegedly contains an “offensive” historical interpretation, disputed normative claims or “politically biased” language.

Retracting a scientific paper and expunging it from the record are two very different responses. I can think of several reasons why a retracted paper, once marked as such on the electronic archive and databases, can serve the scientific community best if it is still maximally accessible to readers. Whether retracted because of misconduct or error, they may still be helpful to other scientists, historians and sociologists, as long as they are not cited for their scientific results and do not perpetuate further errors. It is possible, however, that false results of a retracted paper cannot easily be prevented from being misused by unsuspecting clinical researchers. In such extreme situations, expunging the paper from the databases and the electronic archives might be a better course of action than accepting the possibility that invalid results could influence clinical behavior. The potential dangers of misusing invalid results can outweigh any social usefulness that arises from protecting the record of science.

In my view, the conditions described by the editor-in-chief of *Human Immunology* for expunging the record of the disputed article fail to meet a reasonable standard for retraction of a scientific paper, for which there has been no claim of scientific error or misconduct and no evidence of conspiratorial malfeasance. The criteria for expunging the entire record after publication should meet a much higher standard than those for retraction. Faced with the options of purging the scientific record of its errors or bias, both forgiven and unforgiven, or of preserving its blemishes for posterity, I choose the latter lest we become vulnerable to fashions of retroactive ‘cleansing’ of published papers.

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1. Suciú-Foca, N. & Lewis, R. *Human Immunol.* 62, 1063 (2001).
2. Tyan, D.B. *Human Immunol.* 62, 1064 (2001).
3. Klarreich, E. *Nature* 414, 382 (2001).