Commentary

Are researchers allowed to publicly disseminate research findings before journal publication?

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Introduction:

"Premature dissemination" refers to a situation in which research results are made available to the public before peer review (1). This phenomenon, which is sometimes driven by competition for visibility or urgent media needs, can lead to "incorrect or premature conclusions" and therefore conflicts with the principles of scientific integrity.

Due to the exponential growth of biomedical research and the commitment of academic institutions to uphold ethical standards, careful attention must be paid to the timing and method of disseminating the findings. Releasing results must ensure transparency while safeguarding scientific integrity, data security, and participants' rights (2). Premature dissemination is referred to by different terms, such as *premature publication, premature publicity, interim release, permeable trials, premature disclosure, groundbreaking findings, releasing early results, and early results disclosure*. This phenomenon may lead to harmful consequences including data misrepresentation, biased public and scientific interpretations, hasty policy decisions, erosion of public trust in research, and even threats to public health (3). Accordingly, establishing a clear and practical framework for the disclosure of preliminary or interim findings becomes not merely a procedural necessity, but an ethical imperative. Such a framework ought to be conceived as an integral component of the study's epistemic architecture and must be established from the inception of the research design.

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It should delineate, with conceptual clarity, the conditions under which information may be communicated addressing not only the temporal and procedural dimensions, but also the normative justifications for disclosure. In this context, the ideal of scientific transparency must be held in reflective equilibrium with the demands of ethical responsibility. The unregulated release of incomplete findings and absence of due moral scrutiny risk epistemic harm and public mistrust. The common responsibility of the scientific community is to uphold research ethics and to adhere to established standards at all stages of reporting and publishing research results (4).

International Guidelines on Result Dissemination

Health research is frequently funded through public or academic resources and often involves voluntary participation of patients. Hence, the public has the right to be informed about the results and implications of such studies.

- The World Health Organization (WHO) published a *Joint Statement on Public Disclosure of Results from Clinical Trials* in 2017. This document emphasizes that timely public disclosure is ethically and scientifically necessary due to the public investment in research. The statement underscores the importance of prospective trial registration and prompt reporting of all experimental outcomes. Timely dissemination helps reduce research waste and reporting bias while enhancing funding efficiency and enabling better-informed health decisions (5).
- Article 36 of the Declaration of Helsinki asserts that researchers, authors, sponsors, editors, and publishers have ethical obligations regarding the publication and dissemination of research results. Researchers must ensure that findings from studies involving human subjects are publicly accessible and that their reports are accurate, complete, and timely. All parties must adhere to ethical reporting standards (6).
- The Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) developed the *International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans* in 2016.

The guideline emphasizes institutional and researcher responsibility towards the society regarding establishment of ethical frameworks for result disclosure in accordance with *Public Accountability for Health-Related Research*. The guidelines mandate that all research results (positive or negative) must be published or otherwise made publicly available. Researchers must also communicate the results of their work to the lay public (7).

- CIOMS also published the *Management of Safety Information from Clinical Trials in* 2005, which emphasizes the ethical management of data from early to post-trial stages and prevention of premature disclosure except in instances of public health need (8).
- While journal publication remains the gold standard for disseminating validated scientific findings due to peer review, in circumstances of public health emergency it may become an ethical imperative for researchers to communicate their findings prior to formal publication. This must be done ethically, transparently, and within legal bounds (9).
- According to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), results should be publicly released only after they have undergone peer review. If it is not feasible to prevent premature publication, authors should help journalists to produce accurate reports, but refrain from supplying additional data (10).

Medical research findings are increasingly targeted by media. Competition and collaboration with promotional entities may incentivize researchers to disseminate results prematurely for personal or institutional gain. The "medialization of science" also refers to such media-based dissemination (11). The term "Science by Press Conference" was coined by Spyros Andreopoulos of Stanford University in the 1980s to describe the practice of publicizing preliminary research results through media, press conferences or press release before peer-reviewed publication. He criticized biotech companies for such tactics in a letter to the *New England Journal of Medicine* (12). The Ingelfinger Rule, established in 1969 by *NEJM*, states that the journal would only consider findings unpublished elsewhere, including books, journals, newspapers, internet, scientific conferences and press

conferences. Researchers are also required not to publish their findings prior to journal submission or advertise their results before the official submission of the article to preserve the scientific value and credibility of their work (13). The goal of this rule is to preserve the originality of scientific results and ensure that scientific journals are the first source of publication of findings.

Discussion

Premature dissemination may offer the following advantages:

- It can assist patients and physicians in deciding to enroll in a study by accelerating participant recruitment.
- It can speed up drug development processes (14).
- During public health emergencies, early dissemination may be ethically justified to maximize the benefits of the research without delay (15).

Premature dissemination may also involve significant disadvantages:

- Premature dissemination via media, commercial platforms, or social media before peer review violates prepublication publicity (9).
- Unverified or exaggerated interpretations may mislead the public, particularly insofar as they purport to demonstrate the efficacy of a treatment (14).
- It may result in a change in the trial recruitment by altering participant behavior based on preliminary negative results (14).
- Motivations may encompass the pursuit of fame, commercial gain, promoting specific products or companies, efforts to attract media attention or investors, exertion of political influence, or compliance with sponsor demands, each of which can undermine public trust in science (16-18).
- It may increase bias in selection of results, for example, pharmaceutical companies may highlight only favorable findings (14).
- Even well-intentioned premature dissemination can compromise scientific credibility (14).

For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, certain data regarding the efficacy of drugs such as hydroxychloroquine were disseminated prior to undergoing scientific peer review and were

subsequently amplified by the media and even political figures. This premature dissemination led to significant patient confusion, disruptions in the pharmaceutical supply chain, and delays in the implementation of evidence-based decision-making (19).

Conclusion

The peer-reviewed journal publication process is generally acknowledged as a reliable mechanism for the dissemination and validation of scientific research outcomes. Researchers ought to refrain from the public dissemination of findings and their purported clinical benefits prior to publication in a peer-reviewed journal, especially when such disseminations are promotional in nature. Nevertheless, this limitation does not extend to journalistic or media accounts derived from material that has been publicly presented in an oral forum.

Premature dissemination raises significant concerns regarding research ethics, regulatory frameworks, and principles of transparency and scientific integrity. On occasion, however, researchers may need to disseminate findings before journal publication. In such cases, the following safeguards must be observed to avoid science misuse and unethical exploitation of research:

- Dissemination should be in the form of official press statements, not advertisements, and must be coordinated with authorized institutions and legal teams.
- Researchers must include disclaimers noting the preliminary nature of data and the absence of peer review, and avoid revealing specific details in press conferences.
- Efficacy or safety claims must be withheld until after formal peer review and regulatory evaluation.
- It must be noted that premature dissemination of preliminary and unverified data regarding the efficacy of a particular drug, prior to undergoing scientific peer review, may foster false hope among patients, prompt premature decision-making within health institutions, and even provoke irrational fluctuations in biotechnology markets.
- It is important to use professional societies and neutral press statements, and avoid social media for early result dissemination.
- Researchers must ensure pre-release review by independent experts for methodological validity and scientific integrity, and avoid

sharing incomplete or misleading data through unofficial channels.

- It is essential to review the editorial policies of the target journal, especially regarding originality and embargo requirements (20).
- When submitting a manuscript, any prior result dissemination should be disclosed.

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Conflict of Interests

The author reports no conflicts of interests.

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