

The transparency of retraction notices in *The Lancet*

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In the year 2020, during the global race to combat the coronavirus, the scientific community experienced a seismic shock when a research paper in the medical science journal *The Lancet* was retracted [1]. Since then, retractions of research papers in *The Lancet* have become more frequent. This not only raises concerns about the quality of research within the academic community but also has the potential to erode public trust in science. As transparent retraction notice will help alleviate the negative impacts of retractions on the academia and general public, I used AI (Google Bard) to check whether important information related to the retractions had been provided. Vuong [2] suggests the retraction notices to include the following information for transparency:

- which parties first requested the retraction, including authors, editors, publishers, university, or even readers;
- which errors were fatal;
- whether post-publication reviews flagged the paper;
- whether there was an agreement between editors/publishers and the authors to retract;
- whether fraudulent practices were involved, etc.

Prompt: Do the Lancet's retraction notices include the following information: which parties first requested the retraction, including authors, editors, publishers, university, or even readers; which errors were fatal; whether post-publication reviews flagged the paper; whether there was an agreement between editors/publishers and the authors to retract; whether fraudulent practices were involved, etc.

Answer

The information included in *The Lancet*'s retraction notices can vary depending on the specific case and the nature of the errors identified. However, some information you mentioned is often included, while others might be absent or only partially addressed:

Who requested the retraction:

- Notices typically acknowledge the initiating parties behind the retraction request. This could include authors, editors, publishers, reviewers, institutions, or even readers who raised concerns about the paper.

- Sometimes, the exact source might not be explicitly named, especially if the request came from anonymous reviewers or internal editorial discussions.

Fatal errors:

- The retraction notice usually details the identified errors and their severity. These can range from factual inaccuracies and methodological flaws to data manipulation and fabrication.
- The notice should emphasize which of these errors were so critical that they rendered the paper's findings unreliable and led to its retraction.

Post-publication reviews:

- The Lancet often utilizes a "reader comments" section where the paper can be publicly discussed and critiqued.
- If significant concerns were raised through this system or via separate post-publication reviews that contributed to the retraction decision, the notice may acknowledge this.

Agreement on retraction:

- While striving for consensus, the final decision on retraction ultimately rests with The Lancet editors. Depending on the situation, authors may agree to the retraction, contest it, or offer alternative solutions like corrigenda.
- The notice usually clarifies the retraction process and whether it was a collaborative decision or solely driven by the editors.

Fraudulent practices:

- If blatant misconduct or scientific fraud is identified, the notice will likely address it explicitly. This may involve retracting the paper and potentially involving relevant authorities depending on the seriousness of the offense.

However, it's important to note that not all notices will delve into every detail you mentioned. Depending on the specific case and sensitivity of the issues involved, some information might be kept confidential or only selectively disclosed.

For a more precise understanding of specific retractions, I recommend browsing The Lancet's retraction list and accessing the individual notices associated with each case. Additionally, resources like Retraction Watch and academic publications often provide in-depth analyses of retraction cases, offering further insights into the process and rationale behind each decision.

By promoting transparency and accountability, The Lancet's retraction system plays a crucial role in safeguarding scientific integrity and ensuring the reliability of published research.

References

[1] Piller, C. & Servick, K. (2020). Two elite medical journals retract coronavirus papers over data integrity questions. *Science*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/two-elite-medical-journals-retract-coronavirus-papers-over-data-integrity-questions>

[2] Vuong, Q. H. (2019). The limitations of retraction notices and the heroic acts of authors who correct the scholarly record: An analysis of retractions of papers published from 1975 to 2019. *Learned Publishing*, 33(2), 119-130. <https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1282>