

## Dr Dreier's method

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**Predatory conferences have become an increasing problem in academic life. Now, this phenomenon has arrived in Norway.**



Photo: Einar Nilsen

On 3 and 4 March 2018 I will attend an international congress in Oslo. This is not just any congress, it is the *2018 IIER 362nd International Conference on Recent Advances in Medical Science (ICRAMS)* (1). Moreover, I will not only attend, I will hold one of the keynote speeches. It will describe my most recent research: a series of 25 polar bears that spontaneously transformed themselves into people.

I left the research to my alter ego, Dr Lur N. Dreier (whose name is pronounced like the Norwegian word for 'trickster'). We then wrote an academic article (*Spontaneous Transformation in Ursus Maritimus. A Case Series*), where Dr Dreier was given as the author. To produce the article I used a freely available online service that generates scientific-looking nonsense articles without any content, complete with impressive graphs, figures and tables (2). The service functions as a sophisticated variant of the more common buzzword generators (3). I spiced up the meaningless text with some long medical terms and added the Latin name of the polar bear here and there. The research and writing consumed altogether 30 minutes. Four days after submission, the article had been 'peer reviewed'.

The congress arranger, the International Institute of Engineers & Researchers (IIER), is one of several operators in the increasingly lucrative market for predatory congresses. The IIER arranges several thousand such congresses annually. Another operator, Indian OMICS, owns hundreds of open-access journals, which are partly filled with content from the enterprise's more than 3 000 annual conferences held around the world (4). A third operator, the World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology (WASET), has set the dates for near-daily conferences until 2030 on its website (5).

The business model works like this: the enterprises arrange numerous conferences in many disciplines at the same time (only here in Oslo, the IIER will arrange around ten different conferences on the same date). Anyone, including Dr Dreier in our case, can have their research 'peer reviewed' and accepted for one of the conferences. Against payment of a considerable sum of money (approximately USD 900 is common), the researcher is then invited to participate in the conference as a speaker. Against payment of a further handsome sum of money, the research can finally be published in one of the enterprise's hundreds of predatory journals. The model is lucrative: of OMICS's annual turnover of more than USD 11 million, it is assumed that approximately 60 % stems from such conferences (6).

Whether all these conferences actually take place remains unclear. A British academic who participated in good faith in a predatory conference under the auspices of WASET found that a number of 'conferences' in various disciplines had been squeezed into a small hotel room, where the whole thing was over in a couple of hours (7).

There are many reasons why this fraudulent business can continue. Often, the name of a predatory conference is near-identical to that of a genuine conference. For example, researchers who had planned to attend the well-respected conference *Entomology-2013* instead found themselves at the predatory conference *Entomology 2013* (with no hyphen) (8). However, the researcher is not always the innocent party. The conferences are often held in

attractive venues, such as Paris, New York or Dubai. The temptation to travel on a commitment-free trip paid for by research funds can be great, especially when attendance will provide academic merit as well. Because, if the researchers may not always be aware of the difference, their employers will certainly not be. When busy academics can prove that they have held a lecture at an important international conference they may earn academic merit, boost their local standing and at worst even be promoted and obtain funding – without having to conduct any painstaking scientific studies first. The time saved can be spent on other work, such as teaching and administration. As always, however, those with least resources are the most vulnerable. This may include researchers from developing countries, but also researchers from our part of the world, especially those from smaller universities and colleges with few resources or limited research activity.

Nobody knows the extent of this problem. We do know, however, that there is a large and growing market for this type of fraud, including in our part of the world. Now, this phenomenon has also reached Norway. Here, we have eight universities and at least 26 university colleges (9). The Universities and University Colleges Act stipulates that all of them must engage in research. And not only that: they should 'participate in the front line of international research' (10). This can be a challenge for their many thousands of academic staff, who are all expected to be visible in the academic world. Attendance and presentations at international conferences can provide valuable academic stimulation and contact with an international community. This can help boost careers and make someone's research known and attractive to collaboration partners and journals.

To this end, you not only need to produce high-quality research; it is also essential to choose the right conference. Just ask Dr Dreier.

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