African Journal of Reproductive Health
Revue Africaine de Santé de la Reproduction
AJRH
WHARC

POLICY ON RETRACTIONS, CORRECTIONS AND EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN

1. Policy Statement

The African Journal of Reproductive Health (AJRH) is committed to maintaining the integrity, accuracy, transparency and reliability of the scholarly record. The journal recognises its responsibility to investigate credible concerns about published articles and to take appropriate editorial action when errors, ethical breaches or other serious concerns are identified.

This policy is guided by the principles and recommendations of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), particularly its Retraction Guidelines (Version 3, August 2025), and other recognised international standards for responsible scholarly publishing.

The purpose of corrections and retractions is to maintain the integrity of the scholarly record and protect readers from relying on inaccurate, misleading or unreliable research. Retraction is not intended as a punishment for authors.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all materials published by AJRH, including:

- Original research articles;
- Review articles;
- Case reports;
- Editorials;
- Short communications;
- Research protocols; and
- Other scholarly contributions published by the journal.

It applies to concerns identified before or after publication, although the procedures for correcting or withdrawing unpublished manuscripts may differ from those for published articles.

3. Grounds for Retraction

AJRH may retract a published article when there is clear evidence that its findings or conclusions are unreliable or that serious ethical or publication-related problems have compromised the integrity of the publication.

Grounds for retraction may include, but are not limited to:

3.1 Unreliable Research Findings

- Evidence of fabricated, falsified or manipulated research data;
- Serious errors in data collection, analysis or interpretation that invalidate the findings;
- Inconsistencies between the reported research methods and the actual research conducted;
- Inability to substantiate essential research findings with appropriate supporting evidence, where this, together with other available evidence, raises serious concerns about the reliability of the published findings;
- Manipulation, duplication or inappropriate alteration of images, figures or other research materials.

3.2 Research Misconduct and Ethical Violations

- Plagiarism or substantial unattributed use of another person's work;
- Unethical research practices, including research conducted without required ethical approval or informed consent;
- Misrepresentation of ethical approval, research permissions or participant consent;
- Unauthorised use of research data or materials;
- Serious breaches of participant confidentiality or privacy.

3.3 Publication and Authorship Misconduct

- Duplicate or redundant publication where the overlap substantially compromises the originality or integrity of the publication;
- Fabricated, falsified or inappropriate authorship;
- Undisclosed conflicts of interest that materially affect the research or its interpretation;
- Compromised peer review or manipulation of the editorial process;
- Serious misrepresentation of the research, its methods, findings or supporting documentation.

3.4 Other Serious Concerns

AJRH may consider retraction in other circumstances where the reliability, validity or ethical integrity of a published article has been seriously compromised.

4. Sources of Complaints and Concerns

Concerns about published articles may be brought to the attention of AJRH by:

- Readers and members of the academic community;
- Authors or co-authors;
- Peer reviewers and editorial board members;
- Research institutions and universities;
- Research ethics committees;
- Publishers, indexing services and other scholarly organisations;
- Regulatory or professional bodies; and
- Other individuals or organisations with relevant information.

Complaints should, where possible, include specific details and supporting documentation to enable the journal to assess the concerns.

AJRH will consider credible concerns regardless of the identity, institutional affiliation or professional status of the complainant. Anonymous complaints may also be considered where sufficient verifiable information is provided.

The journal will treat complainants' identities and contact details confidentially to the extent permitted by applicable law and the requirements of a fair investigation.

5. Investigation Procedure

Upon receiving a credible complaint or identifying a potential problem with a published article, the Editor-in-Chief or a designated editorial representative shall conduct an initial assessment.

The investigation may involve the following steps:

5.1 Preliminary Assessment

The journal will assess the nature and seriousness of the allegations, examine the available evidence and determine whether further investigation is warranted.

Where necessary, the journal may consult relevant editorial board members, independent subject experts or research integrity specialists.

5.2 Request for Explanation from Authors

Where appropriate, the corresponding author and other relevant authors will be contacted and informed of the specific concerns.

Authors may be requested to provide explanations and supporting documentation, including:

- Original research data and datasets;
- Completed questionnaires and data collection instruments;
- Research protocols and analysis files;
- Ethical approval letters and research permissions;
- Informed consent documentation, where applicable;
- Relevant institutional correspondence; and
- Other records necessary to verify the research and its reported findings.

Authors will be given a reasonable opportunity to respond and provide the requested information. The period allowed will depend on the complexity and urgency of the case.

5.3 Assessment of Submitted Evidence

The journal will evaluate the authors' explanations and supporting documents against the concerns raised and the information contained in the published article.

Where necessary, AJRH may seek independent verification from the relevant institution, research ethics committee, funding body or other appropriate authority.

The journal may also consult independent experts where specialised technical or methodological assessment is required.

5.4 Consideration of All Relevant Information

The Editorial Board will consider the available evidence objectively and fairly. The journal will not presume misconduct solely because an allegation has been made, an author has failed to respond, or a complainant has expressed strong concerns.

However, an author's failure to provide essential supporting records may be considered alongside other evidence when assessing whether the published findings can be relied upon.

6. Editorial Decisions and Available Actions

Following an investigation, AJRH may take one or more of the following actions, depending on the nature and seriousness of the concerns.

6.1 No Further Action

Where the concerns are not substantiated or do not affect the reliability or integrity of the publication, the journal may decide that no editorial action is necessary.

6.2 Correction

A correction may be issued where an error or omission is identified but the overall findings and conclusions remain reliable.

Corrections may address errors in authorship, affiliations, data presentation, figures, tables, references or other published information.

A correction notice will clearly identify the original article, describe the error and state the correction made. The correction notice will be linked to the original article.

6.3 Expression of Concern

An Expression of Concern may be published where there are substantial concerns about a published article but the available evidence is insufficient to reach a final decision.

This may arise where:

- An investigation is ongoing;
- Essential supporting records have not yet been obtained;
- An institution has not completed its investigation;
- The evidence is inconclusive; or
- There are unresolved questions that may affect the reliability of the publication.

An Expression of Concern will be clearly labelled, freely accessible and linked to the article in question.

Where the investigation is subsequently concluded, AJRH will review the matter and determine whether a correction, retraction or no further action is appropriate. If a retraction follows, the notice will supersede the Expression of Concern.

6.4 Retraction

A published article may be retracted when the Editor-in-Chief, following consideration of the available evidence and consultation with the Editorial Board where appropriate, concludes that the findings or conclusions are sufficiently unreliable, misleading or seriously compromised that the article should no longer be relied upon as part of the scholarly record.

Retraction may proceed even where some or all authors disagree with the decision, provided that the decision is supported by the available evidence and is consistent with this policy.

7. Decision-Making Authority

The Editor-in-Chief has primary responsibility for editorial decisions concerning corrections, Expressions of Concern and retractions.

The Editor-in-Chief may consult the Editorial Board, independent experts, the publisher or other appropriate specialists before reaching a decision.

Where the Editor-in-Chief has a personal, professional or institutional conflict of interest, the matter will be referred to an independent editor or appropriately designated member of the Editorial Board.

The final decision to retract an article rests with the Editor-in-Chief or the independent editor acting in that capacity. The publisher may provide administrative, technical and legal support but should not improperly influence editorial decisions.

All decisions must be based on the available evidence and the need to protect the integrity of the scholarly record.

8. Notification of Authors

Before a retraction is finalised, AJRH will normally notify the corresponding author and, where practicable, all co-authors of:

- The concerns that prompted the investigation;
- The evidence or issues that have led the journal to question the reliability of the article;
- The proposed editorial action; and
- The opportunity to provide a response or relevant supporting information.

The journal will consider any response received before making its final decision.

If the authors do not respond within the specified period, or decline to provide requested information, the journal may proceed on the basis of the evidence available.

The absence of an author response alone will not automatically constitute grounds for retraction.

9. Retraction Notice

Every retraction of a published article will be accompanied by a separate, formal Notice of Retraction.

The notice shall:

- Have a heading that clearly identifies it as a retraction and includes the full title of the original article;
- Identify the full title and authors of the retracted article;
- Provide the complete bibliographic reference and DOI of the original article;
- State who is retracting the article, preferably the Editor-in-Chief on behalf of the journal;
- Explain the specific reasons for the retraction;
- Describe the basis for the editorial decision sufficiently to inform readers;
- State whether the authors agree, disagree or did not respond, where appropriate and known;
- Avoid speculative, inflammatory or unnecessarily accusatory language;
- Be published as soon as reasonably possible after the decision;
- Be freely accessible without subscription or payment; and
- Be permanently linked to the original article.

The notice should be published as a separate citable item, preferably with its own DOI. It should have a clearly identifiable page or electronic record and be included as a separate entry in the Table of Contents of the relevant journal issue.

The retracted status should also be reflected in the original article's abstract, full text, PDF and online metadata, where applicable.

Where an article is retracted because of honest error rather than misconduct, the notice should make this distinction clear where the facts permit.

The notice must not make allegations of deliberate fabrication, falsification or other misconduct unless such allegations are supported by the evidence.

10. Treatment of the Original Retracted Article

AJRH will normally retain the original retracted article as part of the permanent scholarly record.

The journal will take the following steps:

1. Place a prominent and clearly visible "RETRACTED" label on the article's online webpage.
2. Apply a "RETRACTED" watermark to every page of the original PDF.
3. Include a statement on the article webpage explaining that the article has been retracted and directing readers to the formal Notice of Retraction.
4. Link the original article to the retraction notice and the retraction notice back to the original article.
5. Retain the original article's bibliographic information and DOI.
6. Ensure that the retracted status is clearly visible wherever the article is presented or accessed, including its abstract, full text, PDF and other available electronic versions.
7. Ensure that the retracted status is reflected in the article's metadata and available publication formats.

AJRH will not ordinarily delete or silently remove a retracted article.

Exceptional Removal: Removal of the full article may be considered only in exceptional circumstances, such as serious legal requirements, privacy or confidentiality violations, or circumstances in which continued availability could pose a serious risk to individuals or the public. Where removal is necessary, the article's bibliographic record and a notice explaining the removal will be retained to the extent legally permissible.

11. Notification of Indexing and Abstracting Services

Following publication of a retraction notice, AJRH will notify relevant indexing, abstracting, archiving and scholarly information services where the original article is indexed or distributed.

These may include, where applicable:

- Scopus;
- Web of Science;
- PubMed and MEDLINE;
- African Index Medicus;
- EBSCO databases;
- African Journals Online (AJOL);
- Crossref; and
- Other relevant repositories, databases and preservation services.

The journal will provide the original article's bibliographic details, DOI and the retraction notice's DOI or web address.

AJRH will request that the relevant services update their records to identify the article as retracted. The journal recognises that each external service controls its own records and update procedures.

Where AJRH registers its DOIs through Crossref, the journal will submit the appropriate update or retraction relationship in accordance with Crossref's metadata requirements.

12. Appeals Against Retraction Decisions

Authors who disagree with a retraction decision may submit a written appeal to the Editor-in-Chief.

The appeal must:

- Clearly state the grounds for disagreement;
- Identify any factual or procedural errors in the decision;
- Provide new evidence or documentation not previously considered, where available; and
- Explain why the authors believe the retraction decision should be reconsidered.

An appeal should normally be submitted within 30 calendar days of receiving formal notification of the decision.

The appeal will, where practicable, be reviewed by an independent editor or designated Editorial Board member who was not involved in the original investigation or decision. Where necessary, the journal may seek an independent expert opinion.

An appeal will not automatically suspend the publication of a retraction notice where the Editor-in-Chief has concluded that prompt action is necessary to protect readers and the scholarly record.

The outcome of the appeal will be communicated to the authors and recorded by the journal.

13. Institutional and Regulatory Notification

Where appropriate, AJRH may refer serious concerns to the relevant author's institution, research organisation, research ethics committee, funding agency or professional regulatory body.

Such referrals may be considered where there is credible evidence of:

- Research fabrication or falsification;
- Serious ethical violations;
- Misrepresentation of ethical approval or research permissions;
- Plagiarism or other serious publication misconduct; or
- Other conduct requiring institutional or regulatory investigation.

The journal will distinguish between its responsibility to correct the scholarly record and the responsibility of institutions or regulatory bodies to investigate and determine individual misconduct.

AJRH will not present an allegation as an established finding of misconduct unless the available evidence or an appropriate investigation supports that conclusion.

14. Confidentiality and Record Keeping

AJRH will maintain appropriate confidentiality throughout the investigation, subject to applicable legal requirements and the need to ensure a fair process.

The journal will take reasonable steps to protect the identity and contact information of complainants, particularly where confidentiality has been requested.

Records relating to investigations and editorial decisions will be retained securely. These may include:

- Original complaints and supporting evidence;
- Correspondence with authors and complainants;
- Submitted explanations and research documentation;
- Independent expert assessments;
- Editorial Board deliberations and decisions;
- Copies of published correction, Expression of Concern or retraction notices; and
- Records of notifications sent to indexing and abstracting services.

Such records will be retained in accordance with the journal's document-retention and data-protection procedures.

15. Timeliness

AJRH will endeavour to handle all concerns about published articles promptly and fairly.

Investigations will be conducted within a reasonable period, taking into account the complexity of the case, the availability of evidence and the need to obtain responses from relevant parties.

Where an investigation is likely to be prolonged and substantial concerns remain about the reliability of an article, the journal may publish an Expression of Concern while the investigation continues.

Once the Editor-in-Chief is satisfied that the grounds for retraction have been established, the journal will publish the retraction notice without unnecessary delay.

16. Prevention of Future Publication Ethics Issues

AJRH will continue to strengthen its editorial and peer-review procedures to minimise the risk of publication misconduct and unreliable research entering the scholarly record.

The journal may require authors to provide:

- Appropriate ethical approval documentation;
- Evidence of informed consent where applicable;
- Data availability statements;
- Research protocols and registration details where applicable;
- Original data or supporting research materials when necessary for editorial assessment; and
- Declarations of funding, conflicts of interest and author contributions.

The journal reserves the right to request additional documentation where concerns arise during peer review or after publication.

17. Policy Review

This policy will be reviewed periodically to ensure that it remains consistent with current COPE guidance, recognised international publication ethics standards and developments in scholarly publishing.

The Editor-in-Chief and Editorial Board are responsible for overseeing its implementation.

African Journal of Reproductive Health (AJRH)

Approved by: Editor-in-Chief and Editorial Board

References and Guiding Standards

This policy has been developed with reference to internationally recognised publication ethics standards and guidelines, including:

1. Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). *COPE Guidelines: Retraction Guidelines*. Version 3, August 2025. https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.1.4
2. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). *Scientific Misconduct, Expressions of Concern, and Retraction*. https://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/publishing-and-editorial-issues/scientific-misconduct-expressions-of-concern-and-retraction.html