

## Letter to Dr Zalm, Senior Editor Publication Ethics

De : Emile Levy

Envoyé : 25 janvier 2022 16:25

À : PLOS | <[pub-ethics@plos.org](mailto:pub-ethics@plos.org)>

Objet : TR: PLOS ONE Papers pone.0011817, pone.0063456, pone.0040992,pone.0053725

Importance : Haute

Dear Dr Zalm,

I have read your emails asking for clarification on four papers, published in the PLOS One journal 9-12 years ago. Allow me, please, to tell you that I will not hide the fact that I feel genuinely shocked and bewildered by this approach. You will quickly understand my feelings as soon as I relate the following facts to you as far as my memory serves me right.

Four of my PhD students have published their research results in PLOS ONE:

- In 2010, **Rame Taha** : Oxidative Stress and Mitochondrial Functions in the Intestinal Caco-2/15 Cell Line.

PLoS One 2010 Jul 27;5(7):e11817

- In 2012, **Emilie Grenier**: [Modulatory role of PYY in transport and metabolism of cholesterol in intestinal epithelial cells.](#)

PLoS One. 2012;7(7):e40992.

- In 2013, **Sabrina Yara**: Iron-Ascorbate-Mediated Lipid Peroxidation Causes Epigenetic Changes in the Antioxidant Defense in Intestinal Epithelial Cells: Impact on Inflammation. PLoS One 2013 May 22;8(5):e63456.
- In 2013, **Marie-Claude Denis** : Apple Peel Polyphenols and Their Beneficial Actions on Oxidative Stress and Inflammation.

PLoS One. 2013;8(1):e53725

In 2014, Mrs Sarah Wade (Publications Assistant, PLOS ONE) alerted me to PLoS One's concerns about these articles. She asked me to provide clarifications about the data of certain figures, and even to submit the raw uncropped blots. Although I was in Europe for a scientific tour, without any hesitation and diligently, I asked the coordinator of my laboratory (Carole Garofalo) and the scientific coordinator (Schohraya Spahis) to make every effort to convene the concerned students who had already finished their doctorate, but who luckily were still in Montreal. All responded positively and spontaneously. They quickly tracked down all the necessary data required by PLoS One, responded to comments, organized the raw uncropped blots, and provided explanations for all the journal's concerns.

Dr. Schohraya Spahis promptly submitted all the documents on December 9, 2014 to Mrs. Sarah Wade. Subsequently, when I arrived in Montreal from abroad, I added other explanations and insisted to Mrs. Wade to know if she intercepted the whole file, while mentioning I remain at her disposal for other information (while the students were available to solve this question). Being myself a fervent adherent to the highest ethical standards to rigorous research, I have ensured full collaboration with PLoS ONE to avert all suspicion. I just want to tell you that the most stringent standards were respected in the development of the projects and the compilation of the results given the precautionary measures set up in my laboratory. Indeed, the studies, carried out by the students in my laboratory were closely controlled by the coordinator (Carole Garofalo), presented and analyzed during the weekly meetings, monitored by the scientific coordinator (Dr Schohraya Spahis) before submitting them the first editorial draft to me.

Despite our insistence, the response from PLoS One did not arrive, and we had to wait until February 20, 2015 to receive the message below from Mrs. Sarah Wade, thanking us for the documents made available to PLoS One, and informing us that the internal editor and the academic editors will take note of it. Inexplicably, all our attempts until the end of 2015 to obtain PLoS ONE feedback failed. At no time did PLoS One consider it useful to advise us that the information provided is correct. Also, all the phone calls made by my assistant to the Journal Office (San Francisco) yielded no results.

Dear Mrs. Zalm, you come back to this subject again 8-12 years after the articles were published and after the departure of my students, and 8 years after having done my duty with PLoS One with conviction, honesty and conscientiously. PLoS ONE as a respected journal should have finalized this sensitive issue when it was time. Currently, I no longer have my laboratory head coordinator (in knowledge of all the data from the various projects) because she retired four years ago; I no longer have contact with the students who had their protocols and results on their computer; moreover, most of the old files and laboratory notebooks from the last 40 years of research were eliminated during the move to the new Research Center a few years ago.

In putting it the way I did, I was trying to clarify the situation honestly and openly.

Best regards

Emile

**De :** Emile Levy

**Envoyé :** 17 mars 2022 15:46

**À :** [echenette@plos.org](mailto:echenette@plos.org)

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**Objet :** please your input

**Importance :** Haute

Dear Dr. Chenette,

I am turning to you regarding the 4 articles that Dr. Zalm has decided to retract [(**YARA et al: 07420188 (pone0063456)**); **Denis et al: 3414612 (pone0053725)**]; **Grenier et al: 07420184 (pone0040992)**; **Taha et al: 07420183 (pone0011817)**]. it is impossible to find the words to say how sad and disappointed I am, and to express my feeling of bitterness. I have never been in such an untenable and career-threatening situation to myself, my former students and colleagues, and the credibility of my group. This comes at a very bad time when my mother has passed away in France, which requires dealing with several procedures.

As a member of various scientific societies and medical academies (Canada, France and Belgium) and as a reviewer of prestigious journals for 35 years including PLOS One since its implementation in 2009, I fully understand that a retraction for misconduct or irregularities can be initiated by the editors of scientific journals regardless of the period. **This is certainly not our case.** As soon as Ms. Sarah Wade (in 2014), Dr Zalm's predecessor, brought to our attention the PLOS One issues related to our 4 papers published between 2010 and 2013, I gave instructions to my team in Montreal (from Europe where I was on a scientific tour) to meet all Ms. Wade's requirements. My team coordinators and students cooperated immediately and got to work quickly to honestly address and resolve the issues. They provided Ms Wade with the data and details of the experiments of the first two articles, being followed one or two weeks later by the additional two papers with the participation of the other students who were not on site in Montreal. Ms Wade confirmed their reception and assured us of a follow-up by the Journal.

However, other than confirming receipt of the documents and data we prepared, Ms. Wade has not followed up despite our repeated insistence. Please allow me to tell you that we found this situation incomprehensible, incoherent and shocking. The blatant silence and astonishing lack of sensitivity from PLOS ONE's Ethics Division was legally indefensible and inexplicable to us and to the students who had mobilized fully to collaborate and get to the bottom of this issue. Now, ten years later, we are the ones in the dock when we had previously done everything possible to establish the truth. We have to face the withdrawal of our papers and clear repercussions on our credibility because we no longer have any material. **Is this ethical on the part of the Plos One journal? On our side, have we not acted according to the best ethical expectations and standards?**

Dr Zalm does not seem to realize the consequences on the lives of many of us. The retraction of our articles has the potential to do long-term damage to us researchers who have built irreproachable scientific carriers. We would have deserved a retraction if we had not collaborated with the PLOS ONE journal, if we had not provided the data and explanations, if we had not made every effort to obtain responses from PLOS ONE, in short if we have not done the impossible in the past. **However, this is not the case !!** I have great faith in my students whose every experiment was controlled by two scientific coordinators, whose results were presented and analyzed at our weekly meeting, and whose draft papers were scrutinized by the same coordinators before being exposed at

international meetings, and submitted to me for corrections and improvement before publication. My team has trained hundreds of national/international MSc, PhD, clinical fellows and postdoc with the highest and best standards to successfully launch their careers. It **would have** never **occured** to me that 4 brilliant PhD students manipulated the results more or less in the same period.

Although I no longer have the data given the number of years that have passed since the previous exchanges with Ms. Wade in 2014, I have provided Dr Zalm with explanations on the salient and common points that ensue from PLOS ONE criticism regarding the work done by the students in the 4 articles:

➤ Our laboratory made extensive use of Western blotting in combination with striping and re-probing in order to preserve samples that are expensive and available only in limited quantities, and of course for reasons of cost savings in reagents, antibodies and time by reusing the same blot. In our case, re-probing allows the membrane to be analyzed with different antibodies targeting various proteins that will share a similar housekeeping protein signal on the same blot. This explains why several proteins of interest share the same reference housekeeping protein (acting as internal loading controls) in our articles. This was our response to PLOS ONE's comments in 2014, which were shared with Ms. Wade, whose very long silence led us to believe that the editor and the journal had agreed with our rationale. Strangely although Dr Zalm has recently affirmed having no access to the data pertaining to the article **pone0063456**, **in a later email she provided an excel file that seemingly needed further clarification.**

We also mentioned to Dr Zalm that, for purposes of illustrating blots for publication, students tended to eliminate data not relevant to the manuscript, cut lanes that were missing, or cut extra lanes of duplicate/triplicate samples, while fully respecting the results obtained and the related ethics. It would never occur to me that these steps by 4 excellent students were taken for untoward manipulation of images or unethical reasons. In this context, scientific journals have developed more stringent review guidelines for western blot data based on recommendations arising from the 2014 meeting organized by the NIH (Principles and Guidelines for Reporting Preclinical Research <https://>; Mc Nutt M (2014) Journals Unite for Reproducibility. *Science* 346:679; Fosang AJ, Colbran RJ (2015) Transparency Is the Key to Quality. *J Biol Chem* 290:29692–29694).

We regret that neither the reviewers nor the editor asked for the original Western blots and raw data to be filed at the time of the review process or just after, because it would have saved us all this unnecessary misery and torture. It is also unfortunate that Ms Wade never got back to us on this sensitive matter when we had done our duty. Even more disconcerting is the present attitude of PLOS ONE's Ethics Division that does not take into consideration the historic and current context, instead of adequately understanding and assessing the issues and outcomes of retraction strategy. In 2014, we immediately cooperated with the journal and its editors to honestly address and resolve the issues with the papers as quickly as possible. It is of utmost importance to realize that the PLOS ONE's Ethics Division had not done its job 10 years earlier when it had all the documents and data in its hands. **Why is the accusing finger on us when the PLOS ONE's Ethics Division is the one which failed badly in its mission and tasks?** Rest assured, if I had

the slightest suspicion of student misconduct, I would be the first to report such circumstances.

On another side, I understand the position of PLOS ONE, as an academic journal that wants to maintain its integrity and readership. So we need to find a solution that works for both sides. I would like to make some suggestions:

1. **Since our lab no longer has the data and details on the 4 articles**, we will make every effort to find the email addresses of our 4 students, write to them, and ask them to make every effort to look for the original western blots and raw data in their personal computer, and respond to the comments raised by the Journal. This is the easiest solution that will allow us to defend our papers properly. It will take time (2-3 months) for this procedure which is no longer dependent on our staff.
2. I propose that the journal selects three or four points that seem most problematic to you in each article, and my staff will repeat the experiments, and we will provide you with all the fresh data after a reasonable period of 4 to 5 months for carrying out the experiments. Despite the enormous work and costs involved, this is the best strategy for validating data. The new results can be attached to the articles with a notice from the journal. We believe this ethic allows new scientific knowledge to add to existing knowledge and for science to advance.
3. I also suggest we can write an exhaustive review for each article to show that the scientific literature largely supports our findings. Here again, the review will be attached to the articles with a notice from the journal.
4. A note could be added to the articles, mentioning that there were points that seemed problematic despite exhaustive review, but Plos One had difficulty completing/checking the process a decade ago. Noteworthy, a "correction" could be issued by various journals instead of retraction.

At all stages, we have demonstrated openness, honesty and integrity, and we strongly hope that the Editorial board and PLOS ONE's Ethics Division will combine their insight, wisdom and sound judgment to finalize this problem that has already hurt us too much, and to find a fair and beneficial solution for everyone.

Emile

**De :** Emile Levy

**Envoyé :** 17 mars 2022 16:05

**À :** PLOS Pub Ethics <[pub-ethics@plos.org](mailto:pub-ethics@plos.org)>

**Cc :** [echenette@plos.org](mailto:echenette@plos.org); [plosone@plos.org](mailto:plosone@plos.org)

**Objet :** RE: URGENT Please Respond - PLOS ONE: regarding your 2010 PLOS ONE article <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0011817>

**Importance :** Haute

Dr Zalm,

I ask you to stop the retraction procedure. I have explained our position to Dr. Chenette and sound judgment must be exercised in this matter. I await his response.

You want to expedite this procedure by not taking into consideration our position and the errors of PLOS ONE.

The ethics department has failed in its professionalism and duty. They did not follow up on the documents we provided them 10 years ago, and now the rush is at its peak. This attitude without sound judgment is completely incomprehensible.

Sincerely yours,

Emile