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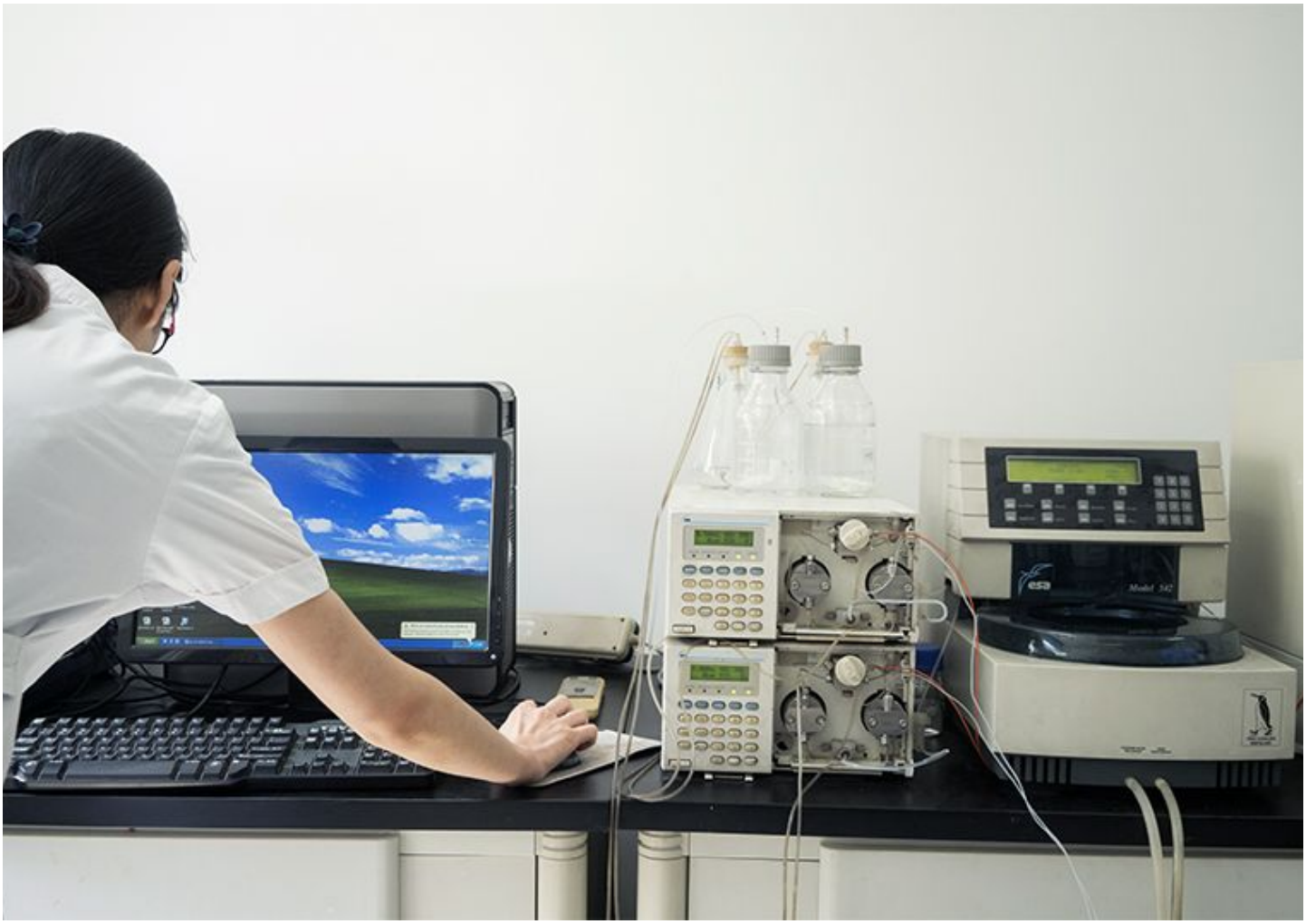
China awaits controversial blacklist of ‘poor quality’ journals

But some researchers say the policy won’t succeed in improving research quality.

David Cyranoski



The Chinese government hopes a journal blacklist will improve research integrity. Credit: Bloomberg/Getty

five months after the plan to create it was announced.

Preparation of the list has been shrouded in secrecy. The government says it will include journals it considers poor quality or those seeking excess profit, but it has not released its selection criteria, nor has it said when the policy will take effect.

A couple of commercial blacklists exist and some Chinese institutions already have lists of journals that researchers are told to avoid, but lists run by government agencies are rare. The Chinese government hopes that a national policy will improve research integrity by reducing low-quality or fraudulent articles from Chinese authors. Academics will be discouraged from submitting to the selected publications, and will receive warnings if they do.

But some researchers say that a national blacklist won't fix these problems and will be difficult to manage. Lists of approved publications are a better tool for improving research quality, they say.

The science ministry was tasked with creating a blacklist in May, when the government's most powerful bodies, the State Council and the Chinese Communist Party, announced a crackdown on scientific misconduct after numerous cases of fake peer reviews, plagiarism and the use of fraudulent data. At the time, the government said that the list would include domestic and international scientific journals, and that publications in these journals would no longer be counted towards a scientist's application for promotion, jobs or grant funding.

Researchers warned

Nature has seen several lists compiled by Chinese institutions that already tell researchers to avoid certain publications. The Zhongshan Ophthalmic Center at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou circulated a document in January that warned its researchers against publishing in a list of journals that it labelled "controversial in the community" because they have had a lot of retractions. The Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital of Fudan University compiles a another list. A representative from the hospital says that publications in the journals on its list are not forbidden, but that researchers cannot use grant money to pay their publication fees.

The first list contains two of the world's largest journals *PLOS ONE* and *Scientific Reports*. Joerg Heber, Editor-in-Chief of *PLOS ONE*, says he does not know why some Chinese

A spokesperson from *Scientific Reports* said they were unable to comment on any individual decisions, but hope that institutions will continue to recognise the journal's value. (*Nature*'s news team is editorially independent of its publisher, Springer Nature, which also publishes *Scientific Reports*).

One list to rule them all

Omid Mahian, a thermal engineer at Xi'an Jiaotong University, thinks it would be better to have a national policy that applies to all researchers than for institutions to have their own lists.

And Shi Xiaolei, a science historian at the Institute for the History of Natural Science in Beijing, part of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) says that a national blacklist and those recently adopted at institutions "will have a positive impact on China's academic environment".

Medical researcher Ren Chuanli says a national blacklist may help reduce scientific misconduct because it will punish some journals that publish low quality manuscripts. "But the real problem is not with the journals, but with the person who submits the article," says Ren, who works at the North Jiangsu People's Hospital. He says that some high-quality journals publish low-quality papers, and that some journals that are considered low quality publish the occasional high-quality, highly-cited article. Fraudulent papers, too, have appeared in journals of all qualities, so a blacklist based on overall journal quality won't necessarily stop those papers either, says neuroscientist Mu-ming Poo, from the CAS Institute of Neuroscience in Shanghai.

Blacklists are also difficult to maintain because new journals are always launching, says Lars Bjørnshauge, the Cophenhagen-based managing director of the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), a list of open-access journals that are vetted to ensure they meet certain standards. Bjørnshauge also wonders whether China might use blacklists as a way to promote Chinese journals over others.

Yu Liping, who studies academic evaluation at Zhejiang Gongshang University in Hangzhou, doubts the list will be comprehensive and include all the problematic Chinese journals that have been linked to scientific misconduct, which the government has tried and failed to clean up before. "Penalizing these journals could have a large, unpredictable impact," says Yu.

Lists of approved journals that meet certain standards are a better tool than blacklists for improving research standards, says Yu.

But Tang Li, a science policy researcher at Fudan University in Shanghai, says it is difficult to reach a consensus on inclusion criteria for journals in either kind of index. China tried to create a national approved list in 2016, but the ministry of education abandoned the idea when scientists couldn't agree on the selection criteria of the list, says Tang.

Most researchers agree that what China needs more than an approved or banned list of journals is a comprehensive system by which to evaluate research quality — something the government also promised in May. “The important thing is whether those who evaluate research are actually evaluating the research, and not only looking for papers in ‘international’ journals on the researchers’ CV,” says Bjørnshauge.

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