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Stay sceptical!

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Hi, I'm Georgia Howat – a senior lecturer at the University of Cumbria. I thought I would give Sally a break this month from knowledge-imparting in the world of level 7 writing and impart you with some of my own.

I wanted to talk to you about the academic 'elephant in the room': Google Scholar.

Through early university, regardless of your course, you will no doubt be taught how to search using potentially new terminology such as 'truncating' and 'Boolean operators', and will be strongly encouraged – forced even – into using these techniques to search databases for work published in academic journals. PubMed. COCHRANE. Sage. At some point, you will no doubt stumble into the world of Google Scholar. Despite what you may think, I am not bringing this up to discourage you; Google Scholar is a resource that can produce massive amounts of literature across most of the same journals without needing to search the journals individually. It pulls from a vast range of sources – not only academic journals but conference papers, theses, books, patents, and even legal opinions – making it a one-stop shop for most scholarly content. Unlike choosing specific databases, it allows you to span across disciplines, meeting the needs of most paramedics. For example, if you are an educator within an ambulance service, do you look through clinical journals, or education? Both will give you different, and possibly awkward-fitting results. Scholar can begin to gap-fill information for you.

Talk about convenience! So why are we talking about it? When you use Google Scholar for the first time, it may feel like you have opened your eyes to the 'easy' world of scholarly information access and – while you have likely already been cautioned on its use by your academics and mentors – the feeling that it is 'academically illegal' also seems somewhat unexplained. So, let me start explaining.

Although Scholar indexes a wide range of resources, there is no quality control on the

information you receive as the end-point reader. Journals worth their weight in reputation undergo a peer-review process, weeding through articles that are weakly-evidenced, incorrect or even hold plagiarised or falsified content prior to floating for your access. Although the access to information at our fingertips is incredibly straightforward and convenient, consider the flip-side of publishing to this platform. Sometimes, the platforms Scholar draws from include those without any core requirements for publication such as declaration of funding or correct citations, and do not consider use of AI-developed work or, even more concerning, lack ethical considerations. As clinicians, we live and breathe capacity and consent, and yet, would we trust a study where we aren't sure if the researchers hold our ethical standards? Additionally, some highly acclaimed journals don't permit indexing in Google Scholar and, as such, there may be a significant gap in your searching; and that gap may be the high-quality stuff.

This takes me onto the concept of predatory journals. It's a 'don't be frightened' and 'be very frightened' conversation in the same breath. Predatory journals are essentially fake or low-quality academic journals that prioritise profit over scholarly standards. Some authors have published nonsense papers to predatory journals as a test. Others have simply lifted already published works, edited a few numbers and populations and republished under a different name. Using their information in your own work risks you damaging your credibility and potentially demonstrating you don't really know your topic. After all the efforts you put into your paper, this will be tough feedback to receive.

If you are affiliated with a university, make sure you are using their internal journals, otherwise do undertake specific journal searches. These can be complimented with Scholar searches, but also consider why some articles didn't raise their presence within your original searches. It may be the case that your search technique needs refining – your academic tutors can help with this! Or maybe you're looking at questionable information. Stay sceptical, and keep learning! **JPP**