To
Joerg Heber
Editor-in-Chief
Plos One

Dear Joerg Heber,

I am writing in my capacity as rector of the University of Campinas (Unicamp) to refute some incorrect assumptions made about our institution and a handful of its researchers in a recent Plos One article by Stavale et al., published on April 15 under the title “Research misconduct in health and life sciences research: A systematic review of retracted literature from Brazilian institutions”.

As you may remember, this article presents and discusses the results of a review of 62 retracted publications in the field of health and life sciences by leading researchers who were affiliated with Brazilian academic institutions. Its authors found, among other results, that Unicamp was the second institution in number of retractions within the analyzed sample, as well as the one with the highest number of retractions by author.

Although I do not dispute these findings, I must express my complete disagreement with Stavale et al.’s affirmation that “plagiarism was the main cause for retractions related to the two authors with most retractions that were affiliated with this university [Unicamp]”. Not only is this statement untrue, but also highly defamatory of the researchers in question.

Given the author’s general conclusion that “most of the retracted health and life sciences publications were retracted due to research misconduct”, it is correct to say that the article also damages the reputation of the other three Unicamp researchers whose names it mentions, in addition to that of the university itself.
It is worth clarifying that all the retracted publications by Unicamp researchers reviewed by Stavale et al. have already been submitted to the university internal investigation committee and to an independent expert referee in molecular biology for examination of possible scientific misconduct.

After extensive and rigorous analysis of the original data, and numerous rounds of interviews with the authors and co-authors of the retracted publications, both the internal committee and the external referee ruled out any possibility of misconduct by the researchers. Instead, they concluded that what had occurred were inadvertent mistakes in the preparation of images.

It is needless to say that most definitions of misconduct in research distinguish it from honest error and scientific disagreement. However, I just would like to cite as an example the U.S. government definition of misconduct as “fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing or reviewing research, or in reporting research results”, to which I add the observation that “research misconduct does not include honest error or differences of opinion” (Office of Science and Technology Policy, 2000).

In view of all that, and considering the potentially dire consequences of the allegations of misconduct and plagiarism stated in the article by Stavale et al., I respectfully ask you, on behalf of Unicamp, to take the appropriate actions in order to correct all misleading information regarding our university and its researchers. My office will be at your disposal to provide any additional information you may need.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Marcelo Knobel
Rector