Buzzy Lancet long COVID paper under investigation for 'data errors'

An early and influential paper on long COVID that appeared in *The Lancet* has been flagged with an expression of concern while the journal investigates "data errors" brought to light by a reader.

An editorial that accompanied the paper when it was published in January of last year described it as "the first large cohort study with 6-months' follow-up" of people hospitalized with COVID-19. The article has received plenty of attention since then.
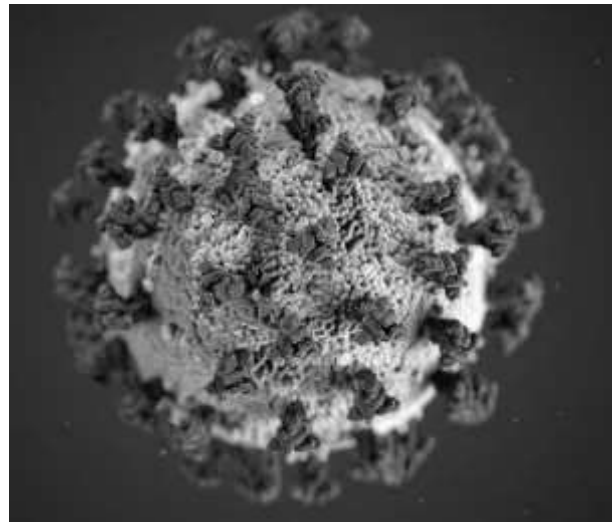
Titled "6-month consequences of COVID-19 in patients discharged from hospital: a cohort study," the paper has been cited nearly 1,600 times, according to Clarivate's Web of Science. Altmetric finds references to it in multiple documents from the World Health Organization.

According to the expression of concern, dated November 24, a reader found inconsistencies between the data in the article and a later paper describing the same cohort of patients after a year of follow-up. That discovery sparked an investigation that is still ongoing:

> *On Jan 8, 2021,* The Lancet *published an Article, 6-month consequences of COVID-19 in patients discharged from hospital: a cohort study, by Chaolin Huang and colleagues.*1 *On Aug 28, 2021,* The Lancet *published an Article, 1-year outcomes in hospital survivors with COVID-19: a longitudinal cohort study, by Lixue Huang and colleagues.*2 *We received an inquiry from a researcher on data*

> *inconsistencies between these two Articles, and we sought an explanation from the corresponding author of the two papers. On Nov 7, 2022, Lancet editors were informed that inconsistencies between the 6-month and the 1-year data were due to "some variables in the dataset used for the 6-month paper were mistakenly disrupted in order". In view of the extent of these data errors, we now issue an Expression of Concern about the 6-month paper1 while we investigate further, including further statistical and clinical review of the corrected data. We will update this notice as soon as we have further information.*

The corresponding author of both papers, Bin Cao of China's National Center for Respiratory Medicine and the China-Japan Friendship Hospital in Beijing, has not responded to our request for comment.

A profile of Cao published in *Lancet Infectious Diseases* last March described him as "a leading researcher in pneumonia and influenza" who "has been instrumental in increasing knowledge about COVID-19." In addition to the follow-up study of hospitalized COVID patients:

> *Cao's seminal papers during the COVID-19 pandemic include the first report of the clinical characteristics of COVID-19 patients in Wuhan, the description of the risk factors for mortality for adult inpatients, and the results of trials testing the use of antiviral drugs, including lopinavir-ritonavir, to treat COVID-19 in China.*

We reached out to *The Lancet*'s press office and Richard Horton, the journal's editor-in-chief, and received this statement:

> *The Lancet Group treats all communications between editors and authors or readers as confidential. Investigations are continuing, and the Expression of Concern will be updated as soon as we have further information to share. More information about our policies is available here: https://www.thelancet.com/publishing-excellence*

This year, *The Lancet* overtook the *New England Journal of Medicine* as the medical journal with the highest impact factor, in large part due to the papers it published

about COVID-19.

We've counted retractions for three of those papers, most notably a paper about the use of the drug hydroxychloroquine that claimed to use medical data from a company called Surgisphere. As Retraction Watch readers may remember, the article was retracted after sleuths questioned if the data were real, and the company would not produce it for review.

Like Retraction Watch? You can make a tax-deductible contribution to support our work, follow us on Twitter, like us on Facebook, add us to your RSS reader, or subscribe to our daily digest. If you find a retraction that's not in our database, you can let us know here. For comments or feedback, email us at team@retractionwatch.com.

5 thoughts on "Buzzy Lancet long COVID paper under investigation for 'data errors'"

Mary Kuhner
December 1, 2022 at 1:03 pm

"Data" may be singular or it may be plural; there's no consensus. But please, not both in the same sentence!

"the article was retracted after sleuths questioned if the data were real, and the company would not produce it for review."

Thanos
December 1, 2022 at 2:55 pm

Agree, adding that data would always be plural, datum would be the singular form of data.

glc
December 4, 2022 at 1:08 am

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/data

glc

December 1, 2022 at 4:09 pm

Oddly enough the term seems to actually be used as a plural and then as a singular (for the dataset) but that being the case, the second pronoun is really not appropriate as it has a different reference (a full dataset as opposed to extracts).

So: "would not produce the raw data," perhaps.

John Davenport

December 3, 2022 at 2:16 pm

I disagree with your assertion that "data" can be singular; but if it were, the sentence you quote is not grammatically inconsistent since "were" is subjunctive, not plural.

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. Learn how your comment data is processed.