



Retraction of the landmark glyphosate safety publication by Williams, Kroes and Munro, (2000) should be reversed

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Abstract

Retraction of the 2000 review article by Williams, Kroes, and Munro in *Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology* has elicited widespread criticism within the scientific community. Issued in late 2025, the retraction decision cites procedural concerns including potential ghostwriting, undisclosed conflicts of interest, and omission of certain unpublished studies, invoking Committee on Publication Ethics guidelines despite lacking evidence of fraud or scientific flaws. This editorial argues that the decision represents editorial overreach. The alleged omissions stemmed from proprietary data access limitations that were disclosed in the original paper and when subsequently published, affirmed its conclusions. Claims of ghostwriting were previously investigated and found lacking. Independent regulatory assessments by agencies such as the EPA, EFSA, and FAO/WHO further validated the findings of the retracted article and attested to the clarity of the conflict disclosures. The retraction's timing, reliance on litigation documents, and apparent biases that were not disclosed in the retraction notice raise questions of ideological interference. Absent substantive rebuttals based on scientific merit rather than speculative claims of inappropriate authorship and data access, this retraction decision sets a dangerous precedent for retroactive censorship, potentially chilling beneficial industry-academic collaborations and eroding trust in the integrity of scientific publishing. With the strongest conviction, we assert that retracting a paper without scientific flaws isn't protection—it is censorship. We therefore call for the immediate reversal of this flawed and unjustified retraction to preserve trust in peer-reviewed literature.

Highlights

- The retraction of Williams et al. (2000) lacks evidence of scientific flaws or fraud, relying instead on procedural concerns and subjective 'loss of confidence' under COPE guidelines.
- Omitted proprietary studies were inaccessible due to ownership by competitors, with subsequent reviews confirming no impact on the paper's conclusions.
- Independent assessments by regulatory agencies affirm the findings, highlighting the paper's scientific validity.
- Claims of ghostwriting were previously evaluated and found to lack merit.
- The retraction's timing and reliance on litigation documents suggest undisclosed ideological biases, potentially from critics with anti-industry ties, violating transparency standards.

- Reversing the retraction is essential to avoid a chilling effect on industry-academic collaborations and to preserve confidence in the integrity of scientific publishing.
- As a courtesy to the retracting editor, journal and publisher, this work was previously submitted as a Commentary to Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology but was withdrawn when the co-Editor-in-Chief rejected it in a form that would transparently list all authors and allow a full explanation of their views.

Keywords Scientific integrity · Retraction · COPE · Editorial censorship · Scientific publishing

Editorial

In a move that has sparked significant dissatisfaction within the scientific community, the journal *Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology* (RTP), published by Elsevier, Inc., recently retracted a 25-year-old review article by Gary M. Williams, Robert Kroes and Ian C. Munro, titled “Safety Evaluation and Risk Assessment of the Herbicide Roundup and its Active Ingredient, Glyphosate, for Humans” (Williams et al. 2000). Published in 2000, this comprehensive review paper concluded that glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup™ herbicide, posed no significant health risks to humans based on data available at the time. The retraction, issued in late 2025 by handling co-Editor-in-Chief Prof. Martin van den Berg, cites ethical concerns over authorship, potential ghostwriting by Monsanto employees, undisclosed conflicts of interest, and the exclusion of certain unpublished studies (Williams et al. 2026). We join a growing chorus of scientists and journal editors who contend that this decision was unfounded and amounts to editorial over-reach. We strongly encourage Dr. Van den Berg and Elsevier to promptly reverse this retraction.

The retraction notice invokes guidelines from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), which allow editors to withdraw articles if they lose confidence in their integrity, even without definitive proof of fraud (Committee on Publication Ethics [COPE] 2011). Dr. Van den Berg emphasized that the action does not take a stance on glyphosate’s carcinogenicity but instead stems from unaddressed concerns, including the sole surviving author’s failure to respond to Van den Berg’s allegations. Critically, the notice highlights no substantive scientific flaws in the paper’s methodology or conclusions—only procedural issues, such as alleged misrepresentation of author contributions and reliance on Monsanto-sponsored, unpublished studies while omitting others—and admits no proven fraud, relying instead on subjective ‘loss of confidence’ (Williams et al. 2026). The editor’s rationale overlooks essential facts that undermine its validity, including the absence of any new evidence beyond Monsanto emails from 2015, which were unsealed in 2017 and already addressed in prior reviews without finding misconduct (Cornwall 2017; Malkan 2025; Mozart 2025). Prior

to its retraction, the Williams et al. 2000, paper had been cited over 1,200 times, with its findings echoed in independent reviews by bodies like the Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization (FAO/WHO). As one of the most widely-cited articles ever published in RTP, the lack of substantive, comprehensive, refereed scientific rebuttals to Williams et al. published in any venue is remarkable.

A central point of contention in the retraction notice is the editor’s criticism of the authors for not incorporating specific unpublished long-term toxicity and carcinogenicity studies in existence in 1999. The notice lists studies from companies such as Inveresk Research International and the Institute of Environmental Toxicology, suggesting that their exclusion casts doubt on the paper’s objectivity. However, these studies were proprietary and owned by entities other than Monsanto, which could only provide the authors access to its own data. Monsanto could not legally or practically grant access to competitors’ confidential research, making the omission a matter of straightforward access limitations rather than suspicious bias. This exclusion was disclosed in the original article. Thus, far from being a red flag, the authors’ inability to include proprietary studies from other institutions reflects standard industry and journal practices at the time of publication.

Moreover, those very proprietary studies from other companies have since been published and analyzed in a 2015 review by Helmut Greim and colleagues in *Critical Reviews in Toxicology* (CRT) (Greim et al. 2015). Drawing on tumor incidence data from 14 chronic/carcinogenicity rodent studies, including the ones RTP’s editor flagged, the review concluded there was “no evidence of a carcinogenic effect related to glyphosate treatment” and no plausible mechanism for such an effect. This later work directly supports the original findings of Williams et al., demonstrating that including the omitted studies would not have altered the conclusions of the 2000 paper. The conclusions of Williams et al. (2000) are further supported by the evaluation of the carcinogenic potential of glyphosate by four independent expert panels, published in 2016 in CRT (Williams et al. 2016). By the end of 2024, this 2016 publication had become the most frequently downloaded paper published in

CRT (32,466 times). The editor failed to acknowledge this post-publication validation of Williams et al. (2000).

Although critics claim the Williams et al. (2000) paper had a disproportionately large influence on regulatory decisions and ignored non-industry research (Marston 2025), such claims appear to misapprehend the rigorous review and assessment process used by many regulatory agencies. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) determined that, in this case, ghostwriting of this review would not have altered their risk assessment and that the declaration of interest within Williams et al. (2000) was clear to EFSA reviewers (European Food Safety Authority [EFSA] 2017). Modern assessments by agencies such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Health Canada, EFSA, and FAO/WHO Joint Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR) do not rely on secondary reviews of studies, nor do they restrict their evaluations to the studies reviewed by Williams et al. in 2000; instead, agencies draw on decades of subsequent data to conduct independent evaluations of chemical safety. In this instance, these independent assessments of glyphosate's safety by multiple regulatory agencies around the globe affirm the conclusions of the retracted Williams et al. (2000) article.

Rather than issues of scientific merit and reproducibility, the *RTP* retraction relies heavily on litigation documents from U.S. court cases, which surfaced years ago but were only acted upon now—eight years after initial ghostwriting claims. This delay raises questions about timing, especially as the retraction decision appears to have been spearheaded by authors Alexander Kaurov and Naomi Oreskes (Malkan 2025; Mozart 2025). Their 2025 paper claiming that the Williams et al. 2000 paper was ghostwritten was funded by the Rockefeller Family Fund (Kaurov and Oreskes 2025), an organization linked to anti-industry litigation campaigns (Zaruk 2025). Neither Kaurov nor Oreskes has expertise in toxicology or cancer biology. Reports have since highlighted Oreskes' connections to the litigation industry (Zaruk 2023), including allegations of data manipulation to advance predetermined narratives against companies like Monsanto (Modern Ag Alliance 2025; Zaruk 2025). The *RTP* retraction did not disclose potential biases that may have influenced it, including those of Kaurov and Oreskes and their communications with the editor. Such omissions seem to violate the transparency standards that COPE itself promotes, turning the guidelines into a tool for selective enforcement rather than for equitable oversight.

Notably, the *RTP* retraction focuses only on cancer-related issues and studies, whereas the retracted article addressed the broader toxicological database of glyphosate and Roundup™. The focus on cancer is consistent with claims made in lawsuits against glyphosate-containing products, but not with the broad toxicological context of

the Williams et al. 2000 paper nor with questions about its scientific integrity. The retraction was released on November 29, 2025, just days before the U.S. Solicitor General filed a brief supporting the appeal by Bayer (which acquired Monsanto in 2018) in Roundup™ litigation, and amid the EPA's ongoing registration review process for glyphosate, presenting an appearance of potential influence from narratives generated by ongoing regulatory and legal battles rather than principled reevaluation based on new scientific evidence (Marston 2025; Sullivan Papain, 2026).

Compounding these issues is the *RTP* editor's apparent lack of due diligence. Van den Berg failed to disclose that New York Medical College previously investigated allegations of ghostwriting for the Williams et al. (2000) paper and found no support for those claims (Cornwall 2017). He apparently did not attempt to contact the scientists at Bayer who provided data access and assistance to Williams and coauthors and who are mentioned by name in the original publication, as is coauthor Munro's associate, Douglas Bryant. These individuals could have provided firsthand clarification on author roles and contributions, potentially resolving allegations of ghostwriting. Nor does it appear that Van den Berg sought input from the estates of the deceased coauthors, relying instead on a single non-response by the surviving retired coauthor to justify proceeding with the retraction (Mozart 2025; Williams et al. 2026). Importantly, the co-editors of *RTP* did not sign the retraction, and input from the current editorial board of *RTP* and from those who oversaw the acceptance of Williams et al. (2000) for publication seems to be lacking. Co-authors of this article include members of the *RTP* editorial board. The lack of vocal support by other *RTP* editorial personnel suggests that the retraction does not reflect a majority view.

Conclusions and recommendations

As authors, editors, peer-reviewers, and members of the editorial boards of prominent journals in various scientific fields, including in toxicology and *RTP* in particular, we believe that the retraction of Williams et al. (2000) review is both unjustified and indefensible. The decision was not grounded in any scientific error or fraud in the retracted article but appears to reflect a subjective ideological perspective that failed to consider and account for all the facts. This solo decision sets a dangerous precedent in which historical, well-received papers are withdrawn on alleged procedural technicalities long after the standards by which they were originally accepted may have changed. Indeed, the COPE guidelines were first published in 1999 and have undergone significant revisions in 2004, 2007, 2011, and 2017 (COPE, n.d.). Moreover, long-delayed retractions like

this (25 years after the original publication) are likely to find the authors retired or no longer alive and thus in no position to defend themselves. Instead, the proper answer to any editorial qualms about this paper would have been to seek substantive, refereed scientific rebuttals rather than to issue a retraction with no objective evidence to justify such an action (Siddique et al. 2024).

In our view, this retraction underscores even more important, broader concerns about ideological interference in scientific publishing. While COPE guidelines claim an intent to protect journal integrity, their application in the retraction of Williams et al. (2000) appears to be internally inconsistent and arbitrarily selective, retroactively discrediting valid research prejudicially without offering new evidence of scientific misconduct or weakness. The decision risks a chilling effect on the traditionally vibrant industry-academic partnerships that provide many advantages and benefits from robust data access in toxicology (Walker & Roberts 2018). The scientific community at large must demand greater accountability from editors to prevent such inappropriate retroactive decisions from eroding trust in peer-reviewed literature (Siddique et al. 2024). This episode also highlights how egregiously the COPE guidelines can be misapplied and calls into question whether publishing guidelines are, in fact, designed to protect scientific integrity or instead are merely established to shield publishers from accountability and responsibility. Amidst a waning need for corporate publishers' involvement in scientific communication and growing concerns about their ethical effectiveness, scientists should consider alternative models for refereed publication (e.g., *EXCLI Journal* [EXCLI, 2026]). With the strongest conviction, we assert that retracting a paper without scientific flaws isn't protection—it is censorship. We therefore call for the immediate reversal of this flawed and unjustified retraction.

Disclosure

The authors declare that they were not paid to participate in this manuscript. Central to points they raise in the Editorial, the authors frankly admit, as should all scientists, that they have myriad potential conflicts of interest rooted in professional, ideological, philosophical, political, financial, sociological, interpersonal, and religious influences that motivate their engagement on all activities and issues. Over their careers, this diverse group of authors have received funding from public, private, commercial, and governmental entities to evaluate various topics related to public and environmental health, including for engagement in glyphosate litigation. Many have also been engaged and in some instances have been compensated for their participation in

discussions involving scientific integrity, communication, and publication practices. Some authors have published in journals edited by other co-authors, a practice that is common in scientific publishing. In all cases, authors handled such complex interactions with adherence to high standards of objectivity, impartiality and avoidance of conflicts to the best of their abilities; such interactions did not affect the research, authorship, or decision to publish this article. The views expressed here are solely those of the authors and they alone are responsible for the decision to seek publication of this work. As a courtesy to the retracting editor, journal and publisher, this work was previously submitted as a Commentary to Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology, but was withdrawn when the Co-Editor-in-Chief rejected it in a form that would transparently list all authors and allow a full explanation of their views.

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