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1.4 Ethics and publishing

Objective: The editor will be able to establish and implement an ethics policy for the journal.

Introduction

Unethical conduct among the biomedical research community and within biomedical research publication unfortunately exists everywhere and takes many forms. When it does occur, it casts a shadow that can have far-reaching consequences – for example if the wrong information is used to formulate or substantiate changes in policy. It is important therefore that the biomedical profession and the public are assured that research has been conducted within a scientifically accepted, ethical framework, and that what is published is genuine, original research.

Furthermore, authors and readers need to be confident that a manuscript was dealt with in an appropriate manner while being processed. On all sides, a degree of trust is necessary: that named authors are indeed the article authors; that all conflicts of interest are declared, etc. Each time standards of ethical conduct are breached or compromised that trust is undermined. All journals must have policies in place to ensure as far as possible that ethical standards are maintained, and that where they have been breached, procedures are in place to deal with the situation.

Ethics and authors

Conduct of the study

It is important to ascertain that authors have adhered to ethical standards for biomedical research in relation to humans and animals (for example the validity of the research, informed consent, principles of respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, justice, etc.). Although the journal can only judge the ethics of research after it has been completed, all papers should be assessed to ensure that the research has followed relevant good practice guidelines. Where relevant, the journal should require statements indicating that ethical approval for a study was obtained from a relevant institutional body and that informed consent (whether verbal or written) was given. The journal can ask to see the informed consent form and approval of the relevant institutional review board. In some countries ethical review boards do not always exist, but where they do exist, their approval should have been sought if appropriate. Where they do not exist, editors have a role to play in advocating for their establishment and in encouraging institutions to create them. For example, articles may be turned away if the authors have not followed internationally recommended guidelines for research.

Authors should be encouraged to follow the relevant reporting guidelines for their specialty, and the journal should promote good practice by directing authors to the relevant web sites so that they can ensure the validity of their research. The Equator network provides a gateway to different guidelines, and provides resources for editors as well as authors in their mission to improve and endorse reporting guidelines. See <http://www.equator-network.org>.

Do you have a policy on publishing good research? Do you communicate this to your authors in your author guidelines? What would you do if you received a paper with interesting and novel results, but which you felt had been produced as a result of unethical research methodology?

Authorship

There are often disagreements regarding who should be included within a list of authors. According to the *Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals: writing and editing for biomedical publication*, an author is someone who contributed substantively to the paper based on contribution to *all* of the following aspects of the study: concept and design, acquisition of data or analysis and interpretation of data, drafting or revising the article critically and final approval of the version to be published.

Some journals require all authors to describe their contributions to the work to ensure that they should all be included. A common practice in this Region and elsewhere is that of “gift” authorship – heads of department or supervisors are often included as authors even though they do not fulfil the criteria above. Supervising the research group, on its own, is not justification for authorship although supervisors and other contributors should be acknowledged. It can perhaps be difficult for authors to avoid gift authorship, but if the journal requires a written statement of the contribution of all authors, this may help to discourage this practice.

Some researchers use “ghost” authors to help them prepare an article for publication. These may be what are called “authors’ editors” who undertake to rewrite the draft paper to improve the English and ensure that it is suitable for submission to international journals. Other “ghost” authors may be employed by the pharmaceutical companies who have funded the original research, and these medical writers take the raw data findings of the researchers and develop articles from them. So long as there is transparency over the article creation process (both to the editors and the readers), neither of these groups of “ghost” authors needs to be discouraged. The first group provides a valuable service to authors who are not completely fluent in the language of publication, and may help to report the researcher’s findings in a more accurate and comprehensive manner. The latter group may provide a valuable service to busy researchers, by reporting their findings faster, and perhaps more comprehensively than the authors would have been able to do themselves. In both cases, however, there are two important points. First, the named authors take full responsibility for the content of the published article, and must approve it before publication, and second, it is vitally important that these “ghost” authors are acknowledged clearly, so that readers are aware of any potential bias. “Ghost” authors should not be named within the list of authors, but must be acknowledged clearly within the article.

Do you contact all named authors to ensure that they comply with the definition of an author? Do you have a policy to deal with problems after publication when either an author has been included incorrectly, or an author has been omitted from the paper? Do you have a policy about “ghost” authorship?

Sources of funding

An author may have been funded by a company/body and this fact may influence the results of the research. While this does not preclude publication of a paper, it should be declared and made clear that this funding has neither influenced the results nor the independence of the author to publish the results or own the data.

Competing interests (also called conflict of interest)

An author may have other interests that could result in bias or improper decisions regarding the research. Again, this should not preclude publication, but it must be disclosed so that editors, reviewers and readers can draw their own conclusions. Many journals require the authors to declare any competing interests as part of the submission process.

Fraud

Fraud is the presentation of faked/invented data, or interference with methods, or selective reporting of data. This is hard to detect at the submission stage but editors and reviewers should be alert to the possibility of fraud. This is serious misconduct: it is a breach of trust and undermines the spirit of scientific research and can mislead readers.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the use of work/data/ideas of others (whether published or unpublished) without attribution and implying that the work/data/ideas were originated by someone else (usually the author). This includes self-plagiarism which is when an author re-publishes their own work (or extensive sections of it) without acknowledging that it has already been published.

With the internet, plagiarism has become easier to commit (as it is easy to cut-and-paste content from online publications), but it has also become easier to detect. There are increasing numbers of specialist programs (some free) to detect this form of misconduct, although most of them are designed to work within universities, rather than comparing against other content available online. Some authors, especially those writing in a language that is not their mother tongue, may see no harm in copying text from other people’s work as long as it is acknowledged in the citations. However, plagiarism can also hide/indicate a lack of understanding of the science at issue on the part of the authors. It is difficult to say how much can be copied verbatim without constituting plagiarism but authors should be encouraged to express themselves in their own words, not only to avoid infringing

the rights of others, but also to develop their own skills in comprehension and writing. If they must quote verbatim, it should be represented as such (for example in inverted commas, and attributed) and limited to an occasional sentence. Editors have an important role to play in raising awareness of plagiarism and in advocating against it.

Duplicate submission

This is when an author submits an article simultaneously to more than one journal. This practice should be discouraged because it results in duplication of reviewing, editing and administrative work and conflict between journals for the right to publish. More important, a study published in more than one journal results in a variety of problems (e.g. biased outcomes for systematic reviews and meta-analyses, citation errors, variation due to editing, etc.), and means that neither journal can claim to be publishing the original article. All journals should make it clear that they will only accept submissions that are not under consideration (or have been published) elsewhere. If an article is rejected then of course the author can submit it to another journal. Sometimes authors feel compelled to submit their article to a second journal if they feel that the editorial office is taking too long to review or publish their article. Therefore, there is a duty on editorial offices to work efficiently to prevent authors feeling this way, as well as to educate them as to why duplicate submission is unacceptable.

Duplicate publication may be permissible in certain situations: for example if the paper is a translation, or if it is of interest to very different audiences who may not be aware of the first publication. In both cases, the authors must inform the journal when they submit the paper, and the journal must acknowledge the original publication so that readers are also kept informed. The authors must also ensure that if they granted exclusive licence to publish, or assigned copyright to the first publisher, they have the permission of the first publisher to reproduce the article.

Do you provide the authors with clear guidelines about your policies on plagiarism, duplicate submission, etc.? Do you require authors to confirm the validity of their papers when they submit, by confirming that the article is original and not under consideration elsewhere?

Redundant submission

This is the submission of a manuscript that substantially duplicates another paper that has already been published by the same author or group of authors. This typically happens when a research project is written up several times for different publications. Publishing such papers gives undue prominence to the underlying research, and possibly also wastes the time of readers, reviewers, etc. Finally, it undermines the originality of content which the journal publishes, and therefore its quality. To avoid this, the journal should require that the authors declare all of their publications that are similar (or based on the same research) to the submitted paper so that the editor can assess how much overlap there is. It is very tempting for researchers to publish as many papers as they can from their data (also called “salami” publishing)

so they can add to their list of publications. Editors should actively discourage and look out for redundant submission.

Competing manuscripts

These are papers based on the same study or data but submitted separately by two or more researchers who have worked on the same study. This leads to loss of originality and there may be issues of copyright if the same content is published in multiple journals. If the analyses are the same then it is up to the authors to sort out between themselves what they intend to publish and where. If the analyses are different, then both papers could possibly be published.

Copyright infringements

Authors may include items within their article that have already been published, and for which they require permission (e.g. figures). To avoid problems, you should require authors to confirm that they have received permission to include any already-published content. You should also note that if an author has published an article and signed over copyright to the publisher, then the author may not re-publish items from that article elsewhere without permission from the original publisher. Many authors are unaware of this, so it is important to ask them if any of their content has been published elsewhere.

It is good practice for the journal to provide its authors with a “permission request” form for the authors to use when requesting permission to include already published items within their article. By doing this, the journal can ensure that it has the rights it needs to publish the items in both the print and the online journal.

Do you have policies in place to deal with ethics problems relating to authors? Have you experienced any problems, and how did you resolve them? What could you do to anticipate and put processes into place to avoid these problems in the future?

Ethics and editors/reviewers/journal staff

Competing interests (also called conflict of interest)

These exist when editors, reviewers or journal staff have other interests or ties that could inappropriately affect their judgement of a paper (e.g. personal relationship, academic competition, financial interests). All such individuals must be requested to declare any such conflicts if they arise, and the journal should take appropriate action. For example a paper may be submitted by a member of the editor’s family, in which case the decision regarding whether to publish should be delegated to another member of the editorial board. The journal must have a policy in place for dealing with such

conflicts. If any cases are uncovered where conflicts of interest have jeopardized ethical standards and fair treatment of a paper, then the journal should have a policy on how to deal with this.

Some journals do not accept submissions from members of their own editorial board, or from the journal editor. Other journals encourage all members of the editorial board to submit their best material to the journal. So long as a journal does not exclusively publish articles written by members of its own editorial board, it is acceptable to publish such material. However, to avoid criticism of bias the journal should have a clear policy regarding such submissions, so that the readers can be assured that the decision to publish was based on merit, rather than the relationship with the authors.

Confidentiality

Manuscripts, or parts thereof, or comments of reviewers, must be protected from any personal use by editors, reviewers or journal staff. For example, there have been cases where a reviewer has taken material from papers they are evaluating and incorporated it into their own articles. The journal should have a strict policy of confidentiality in this regard and should ensure that reviewers are all well informed of their ethical responsibilities towards authors. The journal should also have a policy on how to deal with infringement.

Do you stress the need for confidentiality with your reviewers? Do you have a policy that all members of the editorial board are required to agree to when they join the journal? Are there any other ethical issues relating to editors, journal staff and reviewers that you can think of?

Ethics and owners/support organizations

In the interests of scientific objectivity, integrity and equity, owners/support organizations need to respect the independence of the editor and not influence the content of the journal. The editor must request assurance of this at the beginning of his/her tenure.

Ethics and advertisements

Many journals accept advertisements and may need them to bring in essential revenue. However, such advertising must not be allowed to influence editorial decisions. In biomedical journals, advertising often comes from pharmaceutical companies for their products. A journal must have a clear written policy on advertising, and the editor should ensure that all existing local standards for advertisements that apply to their country are enforced.

Issues that should be considered when creating an advertising policy include the following:

- No advertisements of products proved to be harmful should be carried.

- Journals should not contain excessive advertising especially from only one or two advertisers, as readers may perceive that these advertisers have influenced the editor and biased the content.
- It is not usual for advertisements to appear between articles (they are usually placed either at the start or the end of the journal). The reason for this is that it may appear that the article endorses a product if the advertisement is near a related paper.
- Editors should be alert to misleading or exaggerated claims in advertisements and should reserve the right to edit advertisements – or to refuse to include them.
- The final decision to carry specific advertisements should be the editor's alone.

Dealing with misconduct

So that misconduct can be dealt with quickly and correctly, the journal should have policies and strategies to deal with possible misconduct in relation to all the individuals or bodies mentioned. However, situations may arise which are not covered by prepared policies. If this happens, a wealth of information on how to deal with specific problems is available from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) which also provides useful flowcharts on how to deal with commonplace misconduct issues, such as plagiarism, incorrect authors, etc.

The usual steps to deal with misconduct include:

- request for confirmation of data;
- request for re-writing;
- rejection of a paper;
- referral to the institute the author is affiliated with;
- retracting a paper;
- naming and shaming.

How these can be used in specific cases can be seen from the COPE flowcharts. See <http://www.publicationethics.org/>

Take a look at the COPE website. Do you agree with the flowcharts that they present – and if not, what other procedures would you use to address issues of misconduct?

Resources and further reading

CSE. *CSE's white paper on promoting integrity in scientific journal publications*. USA, Council of Science Editors (CSE), 2006. Visited 29 June 2009. http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/editorial_policies/white_paper.cfm

COPE. *Best practice guidelines for journal editors*. UK, Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), 2002. Visited 29 June 2009. <http://publicationethics.org/code-conduct>

Ethical issues, In: Maisonneuve J et al. (eds). *Science editors' handbook*. UK, European Association of Science Editors (EASE), 2007. Section 1-4.

ICMJE. *Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals: writing and editing for biomedical publication*. Updated October 2008. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). Visited 29 June 2009. <http://www.icmje.org>

WAME. *Publication ethics policies for medical journals*. [Undated] The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), USA. Visited 29 June 2009. <http://www.wame.org/resources/publication-ethics-policies-for-medical-journals>