

Workshop on Publication Ethics

Facilitator: Fatema Jawad

Co-Facilitators: Kiran Ejaz, Shahid Shamim

Journal of Pakistan Medical Association, Karachi, Pakistan

email: jpma_jpma@hotmail.com

Introduction

The importance of Ethics in Research and Publication cannot be denied. Its recognition dates back to the Nuremberg Trial in 1946 which led to the formation of the Nuremberg Code. With the passage of time and better understanding of honesty in research and its publication, rules have been laid down for ethical standards, which have been internationally recognized. It has also been observed that researchers and authors tend to adopt unfair means for various reasons. At times it is either ignorance or lack of sufficient knowledge on the subject of ethics.

The aim of this workshop was to address the day to day problems on righteousness in publication, encountered and experienced by editors, reviewers and authors in the field of biomedical publication. Another objective was to create awareness of ethical problems on research publication and to be better equipped for solving problems encountered in day to day practice of medical writing. The topics included were, Scientific Fraud (Data Fabrication/Falsification), Redundant Publication (Duplicate/Salami), Plagiarism, Conflict of interest, Disputed Authorship, Reviewer and Editorial Misconduct.

Cases on all the relevant subjects were selected from the COPE ANNUAL REPORTS (Committee on Publication Ethics, UK) with due permission. These were presented and discussed with the participants. The Advice of the COPE's Forum on each case was provided as the expert opinion.

It was an interactive session with the participants presenting their experiences, hopes and fears. At the end of the session, Guidelines for Prevention of Publication Misconduct were produced with joint consensus.

It was satisfying that after the intensive activity, each participant could take home knowledge on Publication Ethics which can be easily disseminated further.

Brief Review of Cases

Case 1. Duplicate Publication

Published first in Journal A in 2000 and re-published in Journal B in 2007. Journal B had to take action. Contacting the authors was not possible so according to COPE guidelines, the institution was informed. COPE advised to retract the article from Journal B and a notice was printed. The Resolution was Author Misconduct

Case 2. Plagiarism of published paper

An article submitted for publication to a journal was an exact copy of an article published in another journal. Most of the data were the same or had been only slightly changed and the text in the materials and methods section was also mostly identical. The reviewer pointed out the similarity and investigations were started by writing to all authors and eventually to the Dean of the institution.

The investigation is on-going

Resolution : Scientific Fraud

Case 3. Fabrication of Data

An author has 150 publications to his credit with 100 on the same topic. With the very well written articles and very accurate data, suspicion arose on the authenticity of the results. There are 135 articles in which author A is the first author, reporting almost 12,000 randomised patients in 17 years. Most are with one of the same three co-authors. The largest group of papers (by topic) are all very similar in design, with very little variability in baseline placebo event rates, and generally similar results although the outcome measures differ and there are one or two 'surprising' (at best) findings. One particular drug features in 71 studies. Dropouts are hardly ever reported.

Investigations are on-going to prove fabrication of data. After some evidence has been collected, the Forum advised to contact the author and the institution. Researchers doing a meta analysis should be asked to include a sensitivity analysis.

Case 4. Conflict of Interest

A manuscript was accepted by a journal and published on line ahead of print. According to the journal's requirement, only the corresponding author's signature on the copyright statement was sufficient. One of the co-authors wrote to the editor with the request of removing his name from authorship as he was not consulted on the article. The corresponding author was

contacted and she explained that it was because of a personal issue as she had spurned his romantic advances.

The advisor of the team was contacted who supported the excellence of the paper but did not address the personal issue.

The Forum advised that the editor could suggest to the authors that he publish a correction with the correct list of authors. If all of the authors do not agree, then the editor should contact the institution and ask them to investigate the case and decide whether there are grounds for retraction.

To avoid similar cases in the future, the journal should ask for signatures of all authors.

Case 5. Reviewer Misconduct

A paper with a new theory was advised major revision by the reviewer A who declined to review the revised article and suggested another reviewer. Reviewer B delayed the review process and asked for minor changes.

The author was asked to reply to the comments which were identical to the previous ones and breach of confidentiality was suspected. Reviewer B was asked for clarification who sent a different report stating 'THIS is my report on the manuscript'

The revised comments were forwarded to the author, who said that it did not address issues mentioned in the revised script but to concepts mentioned in the original manuscript. Reviewer B had not seen the comments by reviewer A, through the journal which is legally allowed.

Editor can only assume that the first comments by reviewer B came from reviewer A, as the first submitted manuscript was never sent to reviewer B. He probably obtained the first version from reviewer A directly.

Reviewer B was contacted for further clarification who did not respond. Both the reviewers are removed from the journal. It is highly likely that both of them conspired to reject the manuscript.

Advice:

Breach of confidentiality is a serious matter. If there is clear evidence that the reviewers behaved unethically, then the institutions should be asked to investigate. Both should be informed of their removal from reviewer's list.

Case 6, Editorial Misconduct

An associate editor received a letter claiming harassment by the editor. His submitted manuscript was repeatedly sent back for changes in format but was not rejected. Eventually, the author withdrew the article and

submitted it to another international peer reviewed journal with a good impact factor where it was accepted immediately with high priority. He informed the editor and the associate editor of the irregularity and that he suspects foul play.

The associate editor informed the editor that there was indeed a conflict of interest as another similar manuscript from another author close to the editor was under review process but he was asked, verbally, to stay away from the matter. The editor refused to discuss the matter in editorial board meetings and has threatened to have the associate editor sacked.

Advice: Editorial board should ask for an explanation. If no satisfactory answer, contact society. Journal should have a policy on Conflict of Interest.

GUIDELINES

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Solutions</i>
Scientific Fraud (Data Fabrication/Falsification)	Author should provide raw data if requested
Redundant Publication (Duplicate /Salami)	Comprehensive biomedical literature search
Plagiarism	Using software before final approval and submission
Lack of ERC/IRB approvals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for original ERB approval letters before acceptance. Hold review. • If not provided institute or other regulatory bodies should be informed
Lack of Informed Consent from Vulnerable Population	Ask for original authentic informed consent forms before acceptance
Conflict of Interest (Institute, Reviewer and Financial)	Disclose source of funding Get signed disclosure from authors and reviewers as per journal policy
Authorship (Ghost, Guest and Disputed)	Contribution of all authors should be stated clearly
Reviewer Misconduct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journal should have a definite policy for reviewers. • If found guilty appropriate action should be taken
Editorial Misconduct	COPE, WAME & other associations can be approached