

Ethical Dilemmas and COPE Guidelines for a Medical Editor

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Editors of medical journals strictly owe their practices to humanitarian respect to ensure the integrity and precision of published research. A few, if not all, ethical dilemmas present themselves during the line of duties of editors. The guidelines lay a critical aspect of maintaining the set-out ethics, especially when dealing with an ethical issue. All editors have fully guided much to be done by COPE.

As one may expect, the most widespread ethical problem that researchers have to address is conflict-of-interests. Conflicts of interest have to be identified within an author, between an author and reviewer, and necessarily within the editor. Financial association, personal association, and professional competition systematically possibly each impact an individual's capacity to act independently about a particular Particular piece of research. COPE goes on the record stating that parties should be asked, if not mandated, to declare the existence or nonexistence of any conflicts of interest. Editors should investigate these statements to see if they have implications in any way on the integrity of the research and if necessary, take appropriate action like nominating other reviewers, refusing to accept those submissions where a bias can not be rectified.

It is the responsibility of the editors to monitor and exercise vigilance against any form of scientific misconduct, such as data falsification and

fabrication and plagiarism. There is a specified model by COPE that editors can follow to deal with such allegations. Editors are encouraged to carry out in-depth investigations and still protect the confidentiality of all parties involved and avoid infringing on their rights. COPE advises that in incidences where there is a record of misconduct, the parties involved should retract the articles involved and issue a statement to the public to issue an alert to the scientific community and, in particular, the journal's readers. In any incidence that amounts to a severe case of misconduct, the editors have the go-ahead to report the matter to the relevant body .¹

Yet another pitfall in ethics is publishing only positive findings at the expense of findings that are negative or indecisive—a situation commonly termed publication bias. COPE reminds us that all valid science is deserving of being published to generate a body of evidence that is complete and correct. Editors are to promote studies that either support or refute the hypothesis and ensure that the peer review is not unduly biased in this direction. Publication bias requires clear editorial policies and supports studies on reproducibility and replication.

It is of great importance that there is protection of patient privacy in these case reports or series, which includes obtaining their consent. Guidelines set by COPE state that human studies should have



received proper ethical clearance and that confidentiality of patients must be up to standard. The editors should receive information proving that the authors have acquired proper consent, and, at the same time, they have de-identified information that might expose the identity of the patients. The critical editorial point then is how to strike the balance between providing an adequate level of detail of the case and being sensitive to patient privacy².

The growth of predatory journals and the rise of open access presents new ethical challenges. On this, COPE advises on the possibility of identifying a predatory journal from a valid one by ensuring journals keep the highest ethical standards. Editors should not give in to pressures directed at lowering quality, probably to fit more publications or revenues from journals. Strict adherence to COPE's tenets of transparency, accountability, and rigorous peer review can help protect the integrity of the journal³.

Often, editors receive complaints and appeals on the decisions they make with the content of a publication. COPE has a recommendation that advises the editors on having clear procedures in handling a complaint within the shortest time possible and fairly. Editors are urged to ensure

that there are sound explanations regarding decisions made in order to allow an appeal by an author who feels his work has been unfairly handled. Open communication, anchored on transparency, forms the basis of trust and credibility.

Medical journal editors encounter dozens of ethical dilemmas and must decide on them mindfully and be guided by the need to take a position that is principled and clear. Their work relates to the credibility of scientific literature and, further, to the benchmarks of quality upon which developments in the medical sciences are based. Dealing with these dilemmas thoughtfully and transparently, contributing to the general credibility and reliability of medical research, the editors operate on behalf of the general health care of the population and for individual patients who avail themselves of it.

References

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