

Dealing with Ethical Misconduct in Biomedical Publications

*Excerpts from the presentation by Dr. Arash Etemadi MD, PhD**

Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has published guidelines on Good Publication Practice which are updated from time to time. COPE (www.publicationethics.org.uk) is an association of more than three hundred editors most of whom are European based. COPE members meet regularly to discuss cases which are submitted to it. After thorough discussion of all the individual cases, it publishes its findings and offer advice to those who submit these cases. It also provides Code of practice for editors.

Some of the problems discussed at the COPE meeting include duplicate/redundant publication, authorship issues, non approval from the Ethical Committees, Institution Review Boards, no or inadequate informed consent, falsification or fabrication, plagiarism, unethical research or clinical malpractice, undeclared conflict of interest, misconduct by the reviewers, editorial misconduct etc.

While dealing with misconduct, the examination of misconduct must focus not only on the particular act or omission but also on the intention of the researcher, author, editor, reviewer or publisher involved. It is implicit that “best practice” requires complete honesty with full disclosure. Code of practice may raise awareness but it can never be exhaustive.

While investigating misconduct the editors should not simply reject papers that raise questions of misconduct. They are ethically obliged to pursue the case. However, knowing how to investigate and respond to possible cases of misconduct is not easy. Committee on Publication Ethics is always willing to advice but for legal reasons, it can only advise on

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anonymised cases. In the end it is up to the editors to decide what action they wish to take.

Redundant Publication: It consists of Duplication and Salami slicing. But it does not include previous presentation at a meeting, abstract prepublication, agreed prior electronic publication; translation of original is referenced besides referenced republished work.

Salami Slicing: It consists of attempting to maximize publications by re-using the same data. However, it is acceptable if different message is intended to be given to different readership. But it is unacceptable if degree of overlap is much greater.

In order to prevent all this, it is important that the instruction to authors clearly state the journal's policy regarding redundant publication. The editors should ask the authors to sign a statement or tick a relevant box which will be helpful in subsequent investigations. It is also important to consider the degree of redundancy i.e. no overlap, minor overlap like reanalysis of the same study. Major overlaps include use of same data and reporting same or similar findings. In such cases the Editors must ask for author's explanation. One can come across honest mistakes, it could be the result of unclear instructions published by the journal or the author is very junior researcher who is not fully familiar with publication ethics. Such cases could also include a manuscript submitted to a journal is a verbatim copy of one published before by a different group but the numbers have been changed. In some cases in the manuscript submitted to the journal contains large sections of introduction, methodology and discussions are copies from other articles which are not referenced. The editors can take various decisions like rejecting the manuscript, write to the authors with appropriate remarks, black list such authors, and inform the superiors of the author or the respective institution, department. In case such a manuscript has already been published, a retraction should be published under intimation to the authors.

Plagiarism: It means copying the idea or passages of text from someone else's work and using them as if they were author's own. Unreferenced use of the ideas of others submitted as a "new" paper by a different author is also plagiarism. To prevent these instructions to authors by the journals should clearly include a definition of plagiarism and state the journal's policy on plagiarism.

Investigation of such cases could reveal whether it is a clear case of plagiarism, there is minor copying, there is redundancy or there may be no evidence. In such cases too, the editors should ask for explanation from the

authors and the procedure adopted to handle such cases is the same as that of salami slicing mentioned earlier. If the author's explanation is convincing or if he or she apologizes for the mistake, a kind hearted Editor-in-Chief may accept that and issue proper warning. But in some cases such authors are in the habit of doing all this and then subsequently apologizing if caught. These authors are plagiarists because once a cheater is most often always a cheater.

It is not easy to detect fabrication unless the editors have some proof from the institution where the study was conducted. Such practices are usually accompanied by other forms of misconduct. In such cases the Editors should ask for evidence carefully. Have the raw data evaluated by an expert if possible and then order final investigations by the authorities. Other cases of publication misconduct include change in authorship, unrevealed conflict of interest, and ethical problems in the conduct of the study besides complaints against the Editors. Some of the useful sources from which advice can be obtained are as under:

1. Committee on Publication Ethics COPE (www.publicationethics.org.uk)
2. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. (www.icmje.org)
3. ORI. (www.ori.dhhs.gov)
4. World Association of Medical Editors. (www.wame.org)
5. Council of Science Editors. (www.CouncilScienceEditors.org)