Promoting integrity in research reporting: developing universal standards and promoting best practice among journals

Elizabeth Wager
Chairperson
Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)
Peer-reviewed journals

Part of the solution?
- Educating authors
- Policies acting as deterrents
- Screening for misconduct (plagiarism, redundant publication, falsification, fabrication)
- Retracting flawed work

Part of the problem?
- Reviewer misconduct (delay, bias, undisclosed conflicts of interest)
- Editor misconduct (bias, abuse of position, undisclosed conflicts of interest)
- Publisher/society problems (commercial, political, interference)
A lawsuit, headed for trial in Seattle next year, centers on a claim that researchers at one company used confidential information from a paper one of the researchers reviewed for Nature in their own research.

Elsevier published 6 fake journals

Elsevier is conducting an "internal review" of its publishing practices after allegations came to light that the company produced a pharmaceutical company-funded publication in the early 2000s without disclosing that the "journal" was corporate sponsored.

The allegations involve the Australasian Journal of Bone and Joint Medicine, a publication paid for by pharmaceutical company Merck that amounted to a compendium of reprinted scientific articles.

Journal editor gets royalties as articles favor devices

In 2002, Thomas Zdeblick, a University of Wisconsin orthopaedic surgeon who has pocketed millions of dollars in royalties from the spinal device maker Medtronic, took over as editor-in-chief of a medical journal about spinal disorders.

It would be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

In the years to come, Zdeblick would receive more than $20 million in patent royalties from Medtronic for spinal implants sold by the company. And the medical journal he edited would become a conduit for positive research articles involving Medtronic spinal products, a Journal Sentinel analysis found.

Zdeblick took over editorship of the Journal of Spinal Disorders & Techniques...
Special considerations

• Most journal editors are part-time
• Editorial role is fitted around ‘day job’
• Most editors receive little/no training
• Editors often feel isolated (unsure if they should divulge details)
• Peer reviewers are volunteers
• Journal ownership may be complex (academic society/publisher)
Editors are often unaware of problems

• Survey of 231 editors
• Questioned about 16 ethical issues (redundancy, plagiarism, conflicts of interest, reviewer misconduct, authorship problems, etc.)
• >20% stated that >12/16 problems never occurred at their journal

• Wager et al 2009; J Med Ethics 35:348-53
Promoting best practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COPE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WAME</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FAME</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMAME</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CSE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EASE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALPSP</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STM</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
COPE

- Code of Conduct
- Best Practice
- Audit
- Flowcharts
- Other guidance (eg Retractions)
- Forum (Post-Conference meeting!)
- Seminars (UK and US)
COPE Code / Best Practice

• General duties & responsibilities
• Relations with  
  – Readers  
  – Authors  
  – Reviewers  
  – Editorial board members  
  – Journal owners and publishers

• Conflict of Interest
• Encouraging academic integrity
• Pursuing misconduct
COPE flowcharts
COPE Forum

- Anonymised cases
- Quarterly meetings (in London)
- Informal advice from attendees (c 40 editors) (editors can phone in)
- Cases entered into database (>300)

Overcomes:
- editorial isolation
- concern about sharing confidential details
Challenges

• Developing universal standards
  • across disciplines
  • across regions
• Using technology to allow faster response / create global Forum
• Lack of time (most editors are already doing two jobs!)
Positive developments

• Publishers keen to train editors
• May reduce liability / prevent problems
• COPE developing distance learning for editors
• Also cooperating with other organizations (STM, CSE, etc.)