

Editorial

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Publication ethics and COPE

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The editor's job is multifaceted, carries great responsibility and is very likely underrated by academic institutions and funders. The editor is responsible for the peer review process, decides the fate of submitted manuscripts and must ensure that published research is original, well conducted and relevant [1]. The editor must also enforce publication ethics, which includes issues such as plagiarism, authorship disputes, and misconduct [2],[3],[4]. International organizations help editors in this task by providing guidance on editorial policies, such as the Council of Scientific Editors (CSE), the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) [5]. The latter, specifically focused on providing advice to editors and publishers on all aspects of publication ethics and, in particular, on how to handle cases of research and publication misconduct, is little known in the region. I write this editorial in order to make visible the work that this organization undertakes, so that editors as well as authors and reviewers can use the materials that are freely available on their [website](#) and thus contribute to integrity in research publication.

COPE was established in 1997 by a group of concerned medical editors from Great Britain who wanted to exchange views on how to deal with cases of research misconduct and publication ethics. In 2004, they published the first code of conduct for editors. In 2006, they issued a series of [flowcharts](#) that provide steps of due process in dealing with cases of suspected misconduct. By then, they had a member base of almost 350 editors from Europe and the United States. In 2007, membership expanded with members coming from all over the world. Quarterly Forum meetings began to be held where cases were submitted for discussion. Today, COPE has over 11 000 members worldwide from all academic fields.

In my role as editor of the journal I also have used COPE's flowcharts when encountering cases of suspected plagiarism or falsification of research results. These flowcharts have been very helpful in guiding my decision process, which can be quite solitary at times.

What kinds of cases are approached by COPE? I will give you some examples taken from the COPE database that includes over 500 cases.

Missing patient consent to publish data. *A paper was submitted to a journal. The managing editor was concerned about the fact that the paper did not disclose how informed consent had been obtained from the study participants. The study also reported on biological samples. The editor queried the authors, who responded that data were collected from routine samples from a cohort of 2500 patients with one syndrome, in one hospital. The submitted paper had clinical data from 12 patients belonging to this cohort. The study did not have ethics committee approval and the authors said that they did discuss with the institutional review board who said it was exempt because it was retrospective.*

After discussion, the COPE Forum agreed that the case was concerning and advised the editor to contact the authors and ask for the institutional review board documentation. The Forum also advised that there should be participant informed consent and consent to publish and that clarification was needed on these issues.

Possible self-plagiarism and/or prior publication. *A reviewer in a blind review process discovers that the manuscript was already published with exact wording in the author's website (thus opening peer review). The author had not informed the editor of this previous publication. The editor points out that two problems arise: that blind peer review cannot be upheld and that there is possible self-plagiarism. The editor asks for COPE advice on whether this could be considered self-plagiarism or not, as this appears to be a grey area.*

The COPE Forum advised that it is up to the journal to decide what they regard as prior publication, and that this information should be put on their website and on the online submission system. Some members of the Forum noted that they would allow

this form of prior publication so long as there is a link to the previous version. Other members stated that they would reject the paper on the grounds of having been previously published. To sum up, the editors should decide for themselves what they consider to be appropriate for their journal and their discipline.

Inability to contact an author to obtain permission to publish. *An overseas PhD student finished his PhD and returned to his home country that was beset with political and civil unrest. The junior coinvestigators intend to publish the research and try to contact the PhD student but to no avail. The university that he worked in is not open due to hostilities. The student's PhD work is good science and the coinvestigators are keen to publish it so they contact the editor of the journal where the other coauthors want to publish it for guidance on what to do. The editor suggests that the efforts to contact the PhD student should be stated in the article and that he should be put as first author. The editor consults with COPE.*

In this case, the COPE Forum agreed that the suggested course of action by the editor is the reasonable way to proceed, adding that a senior member of the institution could vouch for any conflicts of interest that the unavailable author might have. The Forum agreed that since the author had performed the experiments and the paper was based on his PhD work, he should be put as first author.

These are three examples in which the editor's decision falls within a grey area. Other cases published in the COPE database are straightforward cases of misconduct. Editors of small journals linked to scholarly societies tend to work pretty much alone - at the most with a secretary and a small editorial board. COPE's assistance can be very helpful when situations arise that are not easy to decide upon. And this is why COPE advices on all aspects of publication ethics,

especially on how to handle publication and research misconduct.

COPE also offers an e-learning course on publication ethics, funds research, organizes annual seminars in different parts of the world, among other activities. COPE's website offers a code of conduct and best practices for editors, flowcharts translated into several languages, including Spanish, guidelines on retractions and different issues related to research integrity, sample letters that can be adapted and, as already pointed out, a very large database with real life cases that have been discussed in the Forum.

I am very grateful for the opportunity that I have been given to participate in COPE. COPE council believed that I could contribute with a perspective from Latin America and this is what I have endeavored to do. It is my opinion that we have a duty to be part of international organizations such as COPE that contribute to better the practice of scholarly publishing, in this case, by providing guidance on ethical issues.

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