How to respond to whistle blowers when concerns are raised directly

A published article is criticised via direct email to the editor or publisher. This could include anonymous or not anonymous concerns about scientific soundness or allegations of plagiarism, figure manipulation or other forms of misconduct.

Let the publisher and the communications team know about any allegations. It is useful to establish an escalation procedure and agree a process for responding ahead of time.

Do the allegations contain specific and detailed evidence to support the claim?

Yes

Respond to the person who raised concerns saying that you are going to investigate and will let them know the outcome but will not necessarily be in contact regularly before then.

Investigate according to the appropriate COPE flowchart or guidance and also follow own publisher’s guidance.

If there is an outcome to your investigation, such as a correction or retraction, inform the person who originally raised the concern.

No

Request more detail saying that otherwise you are unable to investigate.

When more detail is provided, investigate.

If they persist with vague claims, politely say you cannot pursue this further.

Note: The tone of the allegations may be aggressive or personal. Respond politely; don’t get drawn into personal exchanges.

Note: Sometimes the whistle blower may prefer to remain anonymous. It is important not to try to “out” people who wish to be anonymous.