

## Free paper session

### The responsibilities of academic institutions and professional organisations after accusations of scientific misconduct

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Two academic psychologists published data on the incidence of personality types on fatal disease.<sup>49</sup> It attracted serious criticism, disbelief,<sup>50,51</sup> and outright accusations of data manipulation.<sup>52,53</sup> Worst of all, these authors reported a randomised trial of psychotherapy in people with severe hypertension, including at least 41 of whom had malignant hypertension. According to Grossarth-Maticek *et al*,<sup>54</sup> 51 people had malignant hypertension six to 12 months after starting treatment: this group, who were mainly middle aged, had an overall mortality of 89% in the ensuing 13 years.

Eysenck and Grossarth-Maticek gave their contact address as the Institute of Psychiatry. The Institute has never employed Grossarth-Maticek and, understandably, it would take no responsibility for Eysenck's contribution to this research programme.<sup>54</sup> After Eysenck failed to answer our criticisms I made a formal complaint to the British Psychological Society about the involvement of one of their members in such research. The Society chose not to conduct an investigation but gave no explanation for their decision.

The case lends support to calls for the establishment of a government office in the UK which could be responsible for investigating accusations of scientific misconduct.

### PubMed: a new on-line tool for uncovering plagiarism

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In early September 1997 a major case of plagiarism from multiple journals was discovered using the special feature "see related articles" from the newly released PubMed online version of Medline, available free of charge. The culprit, a professor of biochemistry and department chairman at a medical school in Central Europe, has published more than 140 articles during his 13 year career.

In 1995 he translated an entire article from English

and published it as original research. His employing institution declined to take formal punitive action against him, citing a statute of limitations, because his plagiarism was discovered just over three years after submitting his article to the journal. The university lawyer made a questionably broad interpretation of the statute and the university swept the case under the carpet.

Using PubMed, I discovered 20 articles in which the text had been taken nearly verbatim from different medical journals. Most of his articles had been published between 1984 and 1996 in his native language in national journals, but some were submitted in English to less well known European journals. He had plagiarised articles from several leading British journals, including *The Lancet*, *BMJ*, *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, *Xenobiotica*, *British Journal of Anaesthesia*; two Scandinavian journals; one Japanese journal; and several major American journals (*New England Journal of Medicine*, *Cancer*, *Endocrinology*, etc).

Most of the journal editors involved have been informed that plagiarism was suspected. The case has not been resolved. The medical school is stonewalling. The plagiarist has recently moved to another institution, a polytechnic, where he again holds the rank of professor.

#### Addendum

Since first presented, this case is now out in the open and is in the process of being resolved.

### Conflicts of interest in review articles

P Pozzilli, Co-editor  
*Diabetes/Metabolism Reviews*

I am co-editor of a major review journal, which is often used for educational purposes. Editors have grave responsibilities in accepting review articles which favour particular therapeutic regimens. Whereas conflicts of interest may be obvious in original articles, in review articles the influences may be more subtle.

My experience relates to a review in which the author underlined the benefit of a hypoglycaemic compound in treating non-insulin dependent diabetes. Full reference was given to papers dealing with this compound but the arguments against its use were not fully represented. The data in the tables and figures clearly favoured this agent.

Sometimes it is not easy to detect bias in review articles and editors should pay close attention to this

and select reviewers carefully—possibly using those with different attitudes towards the topic in question. Often contributors are chosen from the opinion leaders who may well have a conflict of interest. I suggest that before approaching a contributor, potential conflicts of interest such as a pharmaceutical company consultancies should be investigated.

### The case of the changing authors

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*Netherlands Journal of Medicine*

On 11 April an original article was submitted to the *Netherlands Journal of Medicine* on the reduction of multiple pregnancy. The paper was written by two gynaecologists, a social worker, a paediatrician and an ultrasonographer; the work was done in a university hospital department. In the covering letter the authors mentioned that the results for half the patient group had been published before, for which the reference was supplied. The paper was considered by the editors on 21 April and sent for review to a gynaecologist, a clinical psychologist, and an ethicist. Four days later the psychologist stated that the reference was incorrect and gave the correct one. He discovered considerable similarity between the two articles and mentioned that of the original six authors—including himself—three had been replaced by two others.

We asked the corresponding author for an explanation. By this time one of the original authors had died and she had been removed from the author list. We then learned from our reviewer that the corresponding author had now contacted him, asking permission to use the results from the first paper and to acknowledge him. There was intensive correspondence. The corresponding author wanted to publish a footnote and thank the “removed” authors in the acknowledgements. If we could not agree to this then the paper would be withdrawn.

Unfortunately, two of the four editors replied while the other two were on holiday. They stated that there were a lot of irregularities in the paper and a retraction was requested. The corresponding author immediately replied, confirming the retraction and regretting the course of events. Afterwards, the two absent editors felt this procedure had been unsatisfactory and met with the reviewer to discuss further actions, such as informing the dean of the faculty. On 28 August we invited the corresponding author to our editorial office to discuss the events with the editors and the reviewer. A reply was received on 2 October, stating that the reason for meeting was unclear and that the authors very

much regretted the editors’ decision to retract the paper.

What should the editors do now?

### A case of comprehensive fraud in a developing country

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In a small and isolated country with only one medical school, the scope for fraud is considerable. The chair of the pre-clinical medical school had been vacant for five years on my arrival. The (expatriate) chairman (X) during this time had an impressive academic record in biochemistry. His CV listed some 60 papers published after his PhD at a prestigious UK institution. His rise through the academic hierarchy had been steady. He was also chairman of the university research committee.

Alarm bells first began to ring in the sphere of social contact. The department had been informed that X had met me before my arrival, while on leave in England, which was completely untrue. A series of bizarre claims of past experiences and research activities which no-one could corroborate was coupled with monumentally complex (and inaccurate) teaching of the intricacies of molecular biology to first year medical students whose numeracy was shaky at best. This culminated in the presentation of a research report which was so blatantly plagiarised that the name of the original author had simply been obliterated and X’s name inserted. An astute colleague recognised the paper and noticed that the name was in a different typeface, as the document had not even been retyped.

Further enquiries revealed an astonishing trail of fraudulent papers and invented research—of the total publication list, only six items were genuine. In some of the remainder the page and/or volume and/or year did not exist and the title was spurious. In some X’s name was acknowledged at the end as technician (which in fact he was) but not as an author. Some papers were genuine, but by his brother, others were completely fictitious. The PhD was also a fabrication.

The lesson? Fraud and research misconduct are very easy to perpetrate in countries where checks and peer review are sketchy or absent, and such behaviour may be much more common than is realised. Bizarre social and scientific interaction with colleagues may provide the first clue to this type of deception which is particularly damaging to scientific progress in a developing country where expatriates’ responsibility for probity should be above reproach.