



A code of conduct for editors of biomedical journals

A suggested code of conduct for editors to guide them towards being fair to authors, researchers, and readers

Preamble

Editors of biomedical journals should be responsible for everything published in their journals. They should strive to meet the needs of readers and authors; constantly improve the journal; ensure the quality of the material they publish; champion freedom of expression in science and health care; maintain the integrity of the scientific record; preclude business needs from compromising intellectual standards; and always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions, and apologies when needed.

Any deviation from this code of conduct could be misconduct and should be pursued in the first instance through the journal's complaints procedure. If the matter is unresolved, a complaint may be referred to COPE. (The process for dealing with complaints against editors referred to COPE is described below.)

Quality and correcting the record

Editors should take all reasonable steps to ensure the quality of the material they publish, recognising that journals and sections within journals will have different aims and standards.

Descriptions of peer review processes should be published, and editors should be ready to justify any important deviation from the described processes. Journals should have a declared mechanism for authors to appeal against editorial decisions.

Whenever it is recognised that a significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distorted report has been published, it must be corrected promptly and with due prominence.

An apology must be published whenever appropriate.

If after an appropriate investigation articles prove to be fraudulent or contain major errors that are not apparent from the text, the articles should be retracted. The word retraction should be used in the title of the retraction to ensure that it is picked up by indexing systems.

Cogent criticisms from readers should be published unless editors have convincing reasons why they cannot be. Authors of criticised material should usually be given the opportunity to have a response published.

Standing by decisions made

Editors should not reverse decisions when authors have been told that their papers will be published unless serious problems are identified with the papers.

When new editors take over journals they should not change decisions to publish papers made by the previous editor unless serious problems are identified with the papers.

Ethics committee approval

Editors should ensure that research material they publish conforms to internationally accepted ethical guidelines, including, for example, the Declaration of Helsinki. The research should where appropriate have been approved by an ethics committee. Editors should recognise that this approval does not guarantee that the research is ethical.

Consent for publication

Editors must protect the confidentiality of information on patients obtained through the doctor-patient relationship. It is therefore almost always necessary to obtain written informed consent from patients described in case reports and short series because ensuring anonymity is almost impossible. It may be possible to publish without consent if the report is important to public health (or is in some other way important); consent would be unusually burdensome to obtain; and a reasonable patient would be unlikely to object to publication (all three conditions must be met).

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Confidentiality of submitted material

Editors should have systems to ensure that material submitted to their journal remains confidential while under review and that peer reviewers' identities are protected—unless they have an open review system that is declared to authors and reviewers.

Guidance to authors

Editors should publish guidance to authors and peer reviewers on everything that is expected of them and on all the policies of the journal. This guidance should be regularly updated and should refer to or link to this code.

Pursuing misconduct

Editors are often the first recipients of suspicions about studies that may involve misconduct. If editors suspect misconduct by authors, reviewers, editorial staff, or other editors then they have a duty to take action. This duty extends to both published and unpublished papers.

Editors should first seek a response from those accused. If the editors are not satisfied with the response, they should ask the employers of the authors, reviewers, or editors, or some other appropriate body (perhaps a regulatory body) to investigate. (In the case of their own editorial staff, they must conduct the investigation themselves.)

Editors should make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a proper investigation is conducted; if this is not possible, or does not happen for whatever reason, editors should make all reasonable attempts to persist in obtaining a resolution to the problem and a correction of the record if it is needed. This is an onerous but important duty.

Relationship to publishers, owners, and advertisers

The relationship of editors to publishers and owners is often complex but should in each case be based firmly on the principle of editorial independence. Notwithstanding the economic and political realities of their journals, editors should make decisions on which articles to publish based on quality and suitability for readers rather than for immediate financial or political gain.

Editors should have declared policies on advertising in relation to the content of the journal and on processes for publishing supplements.

Conflict of interest

Editors should have systems for managing their own conflicts of interest as well as the conflicts of interest of their staff, authors, and reviewers. Readers should be informed about who has funded research and on the role of the funders in the research.

Ways to complain

Editors should respond promptly to complaints and should ensure that there is a way for dissatisfied complainants to take complaints further. This mechanism should be made clear in the journal and should include information on how to refer unresolved matters to COPE.

Process for dealing with complaints against editors referred to COPE

(Agreed by COPE Council, 29 November 2004)

Referrals to COPE

- A complaint may be referred to COPE by an author, reader, reviewer, editor or publisher. Cases may only be referred where the editor/ journal in question is a member of COPE.
- In the first instance complaints against an editor should be made directly to him or her in writing. If the complaint is not resolved satisfactorily, it should be passed to the editor's overseeing body or ombudsman where one exists. Only complaints that have been through the journal's complaint's procedure can be referred to COPE. In referring a complaint to COPE, all relevant correspondence should be enclosed.
- COPE will accept referrals made within six months of the journal completing its own complaints procedure. COPE may consider cases outside this time period in exceptional circumstances.

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- COPE will not consider complaints about the substance (rather than the process) of editorial decisions, or criticisms about editorial content.
- COPE will not consider referrals that relate to incidents that occurred before the publication of this code.

When a complaint is referred to COPE:

1. The referrer submits a complaint to the administrator.
2. The COPE administrator confirms that the complaint is:
 - a. against a member of COPE
 - b. within the remit of the Code
 - c. unresolved after passing properly through the journal's complaints procedure
 - d. relating to an incident that occurred after this code came into force (January 1, 2005)
3. The referrer is asked to provide evidence, with all relevant supporting documents including correspondence relating to the hearing of the complaint by the journal, in confidence to the Chair of COPE.
4. The Chair of COPE informs the editor of the journal in question that the complaint has been referred to COPE.
5. A number of potential scenarios may occur:
 - a. The editor refuses to cooperate, in which case, the Chair of COPE informs the referrer and the owner of the journal.
 - b. The editor replies stating his/her case:
 - i. The Chair of COPE, with one other nominated Council member, decides that the journal has dealt with the complaint satisfactorily and advises the referrer and editor accordingly.
 - ii. The Chair of COPE, with one other nominated Council member, decides that there is a need for further investigation, advises the referrer and editor accordingly, and reports this to an appropriately constituted sub committee of the COPE Council.
6. The sub-committee considering the complaint will consist of at least the Chair and three other members of COPE Council. Two of the members must not be editors. None of the sub-committee members should belong to the same publishing group as the Editor in question.
7. If the Chair belongs to the same publishing group as the editor in question, s/he will appoint an appropriate deputy to oversee the proceedings.
8. When the case comes to the sub-committee, the sub-committee either:
 - a. dismisses it, and the referrer and editor are so advised and given reasons
 - b. reaches the view that a breach of the code has taken place.When the sub-committee is of the view that a breach of the code has taken place it presents a report to the COPE Council explaining the nature of the breach and recommending a course of action.
9. The COPE Council considers the report and may modify the recommendations. The Council informs the referrer, the editor and the owner of its final recommendations. These recommendations may include:
 - a. that the editor apologise to the original complainant;
 - b. that the editor publish a statement from COPE in his/her journal;
 - c. that the journal improve its processes;
 - d. that the editor resigns from COPE membership for a period of time; or
 - e. any other action which the COPE Council feels is appropriate given the circumstances of the case.

Appeals procedure

Appeals against a COPE recommendation may be made to COPE's external ombudsperson, contact details for whom will be provided on request.