



Forum agenda

**Meeting to be held on Tuesday 6 December 2011 at 3pm
The Council Chamber, The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH),
5-11 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SH**

1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair

2. New cases

- 11-23 Possible overlapping publications/data (SK)**
- 11-24 Inappropriate authorship (FJ)**
- 11-25 Lack of ethical approval and not reporting experimental evidence (AS)**
- 11-26 Publication of private data (AM)**
- 11-27 Author creates bogus email accounts for proposed reviewers (JM)**
- 11-28 Request to withdraw as an author of an accepted but unpublished paper (RK)**
- 11-29 Reviewer asks trainee to review manuscript (KY)**

3. Updates

- 10-06 Concerns over research by an author in numerous, separate publications**
- 11-10 Duplicate publication and alleged image manipulation**
- 11-11 Lack of trial registration leads to new concerns about study conduct and ethical review/approval**
- 11-18 Retraction or correction?**
- 11-20 Duplicate publication allegation**
- 11-22 Transparency of peer review to co-authors**

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NEW CASES

11-23 Possible overlapping publications/data (SK)

As editor-in-chief of a journal (journal A), I was contacted by an individual (N) who indicated the following: authors of an article published in journal A were questioned as to the similarity of a figure and a table appearing in both journal A and in another journal (journal B). N noted that reanalysis of the data of the published work by the authors suggested errors and inconsistencies of the similar data across journal A and journal B.

Subsequently, N provided additional details, including notice of a third journal (journal C) that appeared to have published a table similar to those in journals A and B. The editor of journal B responded to this saying that although the authors had been contacted by the editor of journal B and a response from the authors was pending, they agreed that retraction from journals A, B and C was required. Of note, journal B had previously resolved a challenge from N with respect to the study in question as a letter to the editor regarding data interpretation with a response from the authors. The editor of journal B shared both of these publications with the other journals involved at the request of journal A.

Although the authors referenced journal B in the article they published in journal A and stated that it was an extension of the study published in journal B, they only indirectly referenced the figure and table. The figure and table did not include a reference or acknowledgment to indicate where they were initially accepted/published or submitted elsewhere. Hence it appears that a very similar figure and table appeared in three publications and a figure in two publications without appropriate assigning credit.

This appears to journal A to be a possible case of overlapping publications by the authors. Taking the first publication dates (including Epub dates) on PubMed, it appears all three articles were published at around the same time, with the article in journal C publishing first as an Epub article.

It should be noted that the authors retained the copyright to their article published in journal B. I am not sure about journal C.

Most recently, N sent another email to all three journals questioning the housing conditions of the animals used in the study and whether the statement indicating that the authors had received approval from their ethics committee of experimentation on animals is actually true.

As editor of journal A, I forwarded all the information to my publisher. I plan to contact the authors on review and after discussion with COPE. My publisher has also informed journals B and C of our plans to contact COPE before taking any initial action.

As well as asking for guidance on how best to handle this case, we would like COPE's opinion on which journal should be taking the lead to resolve these concerns, as it involves multiple journals.

11-24 Inappropriate authorship on students paper (FJ)

A cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study which was a final year student's project was submitted as an original article to our journal on 30 April 2011. On initial review it was obvious that it was conducted by students and written by them, but the list of authors had the supervisor as the first author, followed by 13 students.

The supervisor, who was also the corresponding author, was questioned on authorship criteria. If it was the supervisor's project and the students had helped, then why were there so many students listed (13 in all)? If it was the students' project, which is a requirement of their curriculum, then why was the supervisor the first author? He/she should be acknowledged only.

The authors decided to withdraw the article on the grounds that they wanted to send it to a foreign journal. We obtained the signatures of all of the authors and closed the file.

The same article was resubmitted as a new article on 29 August 2011. The declaration that it had not been previously published was sent to our journal on 5 September 2011. No change had been made in the names of the authors. The signatures of the students were a photocopy of the original ones submitted previously. Apparently the supervisor thought that the journal office would not be able to associate this article with the previous submission.

The journal believes it would be useless to explain the authorship criteria to the supervisor as apparently he/she is eager to have another article on their CV. The students are the ones who suffer.

What steps should the journal take, particularly with regard to the false authorship?

11-25 Lack of ethical approval and not reporting experimental evidence (AS)

In May 2011 a letter from the Vice-Rector for Personnel of a reputable university was sent to the editor mentioning that two articles published in the journal contained two statements not supported by documented evidence. The two statements related to: (1) approval of the local ethics committee and (2) representation of the experimental evidence.

With regard to point (1), the authors stated in the article that they had approval in 1995 for their research protocols but the authorities state that there is no written documentation of this agreement and that this cannot substitute for formal approval of the research. The journal and the university rules indicate that formal approval of an ethics committee is required.

With regard to point (2), a statement in both articles cannot be sustained for one of three patients in one of the articles and for one case in the second article. Laboratory analysis revealed contradictory evidence from the authors' statements in the articles. The authors gave three reasons why they ignored this information. Unfortunately, the samples kept in the authors' laboratory were destroyed in a fire.

According to the letter from the academic authorities, "the authors have been kept informed of these facts, which are in breach of the rules of good scientific conduct".

One of the articles is coauthored by three colleagues from another university. They have asked the journal that their names be removed.

The author of the articles, who received a copy of the letter from the Vice-Rector, asked to have some time to send in his rebuttal of the accusations. For both issues the answers provided by the authors were submitted to the university and were judged as unsatisfactory.

Long discussions within the publications committee of the journal with representatives of the publisher and the scientific society led to the decision that an "expression of concern" should be published. Prior to publication, the expression of concern was sent to the authors and the university for their comments. Just before the deadline, a letter arrived from the university (signed by the Vice-Rector and the Rector). The conclusion of the letter was that the university believed an expression of concern was not needed. The university believed that the authors recognized that they made mistakes in relation to both issues but since they acted "in good faith" the university had closed the case and did not consider an expression of concern appropriate.

So the journal was faced with an author admitting two serious "mistakes" in two articles. The institution that originally raised the concerns backed off in the end. After consulting with the editorial team I wrote to the author asking him to send a letter to the editor signed by all authors correcting the serious mistakes in the literature. A confidential draft letter was received from the author, and edited and completed by the editor so that both issues were mentioned. This letter was signed by all authors at this author's institution. Three authors at a different institution refused to sign the letter as they believed that the letter to the editor did not clarify the situation. These three authors confirm their initial position and encourage the other authors to retract both articles. A copy of the email correspondence between the author and a spokesman for the other institution indicates that the author does not want to do this.

A possible conclusion would be to publish the letter to the editor signed by the authors from the institution of the first author as well as a letter to the editor from the three authors from the other institution. This would be accompanied by an expression of concern or an editorial by the editor, highlighting the necessity of proper ethics approval and reporting all experimental data.

An additional question to COPE: should other editors be informed of this? In a sister journal, an article was submitted mentioning the same very outdated ethics approval.

11-26 Publication of private data (AM)

An article was submitted for publication. This was a survey of research activity in a specialist area and included, among other things, research funding amounts from each institution. This led to a sort of 'league table'. The information was provided by the responding director of the specialty area or head of school/research group of each institution. The cover letter stated this is for research purposes. No particular ethics approval was sought for the study as it was based on staff/professionals and most were known to the principal author.

The question is whether these data on amount of funding are private or public. While grant income data can be available in funders' websites/reports or the institutional/departmental websites, certainly it exists in Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) reports that are available to the public for past research, this may not be the case for all research grants (ie, industry grants or private donations).

Is research grant income classified as private data (in which case, consent is needed) or it is public data and the cover letter to the study means that returning completed questionnaires implies consent?

11-27 Author creates bogus email accounts for proposed reviewers (JM)

Recently, as co-editor of my journal, I received a manuscript submitted for publication. The author had recommended two reviewers along with their Gmail accounts and affiliations. I was curious about the affiliation of one of the reviewers. I looked this person up and discovered they had a different email address than that provided by the author. So I used the email address that I found to contact the reviewer (reviewer 1). For the second recommended reviewer (reviewer 2), I also looked up a current email address and used the one I found instead of the Gmail address that was provided by the author.

Reviewer 1 responded with the comment that the title of the manuscript looked similar to a manuscript review that he/she had been asked to confirm for another journal (journal 1). Reviewer 1 asked me to contact the editor of journal 1. After contacting the editor of journal 1, I discovered that the author had provided bogus email accounts for the recommended reviewers.

The editor of journal 1 became suspicious of the reviews when he received a review within hours of the request to review the manuscript. It was at this point that the editor of journal 1 discovered that the email addresses provided were bogus.

Reviewer 2 declined my request to review the manuscript. To test that the Gmail provided by the author was bogus, I sent a request to review the manuscript to reviewer 2's bogus Gmail account. Within hours I received a review. I then called reviewer 2 to confirm that he/she had not provided a review. He/she had not, and was very concerned that a Gmail account was created using their name.

In summary, this author has been creating false email accounts for suggested reviewers which are going to unknown individuals who are providing reviews under false pretences and giving inaccurate information as to their identity and affiliation. The outcome of this is that my fellow co-editor and I have banned this individual from publishing in our journal. The author has also been banned from publishing in journal 1. Does COPE have any additional advice on this case?

11-28 Request to withdraw as an author of an accepted but unpublished paper (RK)

Last March we accepted a paper written by a post-doctoral fellow (PD) and an assistant professor (AP). The work was done by PD in AP's laboratory; PD has now moved on (to another country, in fact). Soon after the manuscript was sent to production, AP sent an email asking to delay production of the manuscript because AP was worried that there may be an 'error' in the manuscript that might require 'some adjustments'. Months passed with no further word from AP. A few weeks ago, I wrote to AP regarding an update. Last week, AP replied, asking to remove his/her name from the manuscript because AP and PD "... have an insurmountable scientific disagreement over how the data for this study should be tabulated and presented".

AP called yesterday to provide some additional background. AP believes that PD made some questionable decisions with respect to the data and AP is unable to replicate the findings in his/her own analyses of the data.

AP's university looked into the matter and found insufficient evidence to pursue a claim of scientific misconduct. According to AP, PD interprets this to mean that PD has done nothing wrong.

I have not yet said anything to (or heard from) PD. I am certainly not comfortable in moving forward with this publication. Yet, without knowing more details and without hearing PD's side of the issue, it would seem unfair to PD to withdraw our decision to publish the paper. And, anticipating what PD might say ("I did everything correctly"), I find it hard to imagine how we can adjudicate the issue.

11-29 Reviewer asks trainee to review manuscript (KY)

A known expert in a certain content area was asked to review a manuscript. He asked if one of his trainees (not a content expert) could review the manuscript instead, with some oversight and as a training exercise. He stated that he would provide the trainee with a full explanation of confidentiality. The section editor replied that it was the particular expertise of the invited reviewer that was being sought. The invited reviewer agreed to review the manuscript. Subsequently, the reviewer contacted the section editor, stating that his trainee had reviewed the manuscript and felt the manuscript should be rejected; the reviewer also read it and concurred, suggesting that the editor reject the manuscript as poor science (my words), but did not include a detailed review. The section editor pushed him to return a detailed review, which he has now done.

My question is: is giving this manuscript (not blinded, ie, author names and affiliations are evident) to the trainee a breach of confidentiality on the part of the reviewer? If so, what steps do you recommend taking?

UPDATES

10-06 Concerns over research by an author in numerous, separate publications

Anonymised text of the case:

The authenticity of the content of numerous publications by Author K has been questioned by 'concerned researchers' in an anonymous email sent to the Editor of Journal A in December 2009.

The email noted that author K had been publishing articles in numerous journals that "report remarkable findings that watching humorous films, drinking deep-sea water, exposure to road traffic, cell-phone noise and radiation, kissing, playing computer games, listening to Mozart, infant suckling, sleep deprivation and starvation all affect various [physiological] responses." Few of K's findings have been replicated by other authors and the 'concerned researchers' were clear that they believe the findings to be unusual and the research based on improbable hypotheses and mechanisms.

The data presented in each of the articles are remarkably consistent 'and, to be frank, seem too good to be true'. Most of these articles have been published by author K as a single author, and for a lone researcher the output is prolific.

The concerned researchers, the editorial office for Journal A and colleagues from the publishing house have all attempted to find an institution that author K may be affiliated to. There are suspicions surrounding author K's affiliations to two institutions. When the author's name and the two institutions are typed into a search engine, a lot of references to very similar articles appear in the search results.

The 'concerned researchers' therefore "cannot help but question whether the data presented in these articles are genuine. If not, this appears to be a case of scientific misconduct that could have far-reaching implications [in the field] This is ongoing, with nearly 100 articles published over the last few years including some published this year (2009)".

Journal A published a paper by author K in 2004 which, taking into account the summary above, could have easily been fabricated from the perspective of the editor of the journal. The editors and the concerned researchers wish to know more about the legitimacy of these publications and whether the articles by author K are reliable.

Advice:

The Forum suggested that if the author's institution cannot be found, the editor could report the author to the General Medical Council or the equivalent medical licensing authority in the author's country. The Forum asked if the editor had tried responding to the anonymous email. There is little that the editor can do without substantive evidence. He could respond to the anonymous email, asking for more information and emphasising that strict confidentiality is assured. The Forum noted that the editor has a duty of care with regard to the journal's published papers. The editor should contact the reviewer(s) of the 2004 paper that was published in his journal and ask them to look again at the paper. Other advice was to contact the other journals where the author has published as they may have some information that

would lead to the author's institution, which should be contacted if possible. The Forum advised the editor to be alert to any more papers that come in from the same source.

Follow up:

Following on from the COPE Forum, I took on COPE's advice and contacted the other editors that were listed at the end of the anonymous email that our editor received. There were 12 other editors and journals listed in this email, from a wide range of publishing houses. I have received five responses so far. One was apparently not aware of the email ever being sent. One asked a colleague to respond to my message, which I am still waiting for.

Three have expressed concern about the nature of the email; one of these editors has offered to judge the papers of the suspected author and provide a response, and I am waiting to hear back from them. One of the editors contacted a colleague who lives in the same country as the author and received a general response from their colleague who claims to know of the author and mentioned that the author 'is known for [their] unique treatment'. However, this colleague noted that "I am not personally an acquaintance with [the author]. I just heard from some colleagues that many of [the author's] works seem to be fake or fabrication, although I do not have any evidence about it".

One editor responded with a lengthy email where they mentioned they have had discussions with the other editor of the journal and administrative staff at the publishing house. The editor noted that "My personal view was that we should go ahead and ask the people who made the allegations to give in confidence their names so that we felt that there was a legitimacy to proceed with the inquiry that was clearly needed by virtue of the allegation". However, the editor was not successful in obtaining personal identification from the anonymous email authors. The editor goes on to say that "At this point, our views are split. My view is that there was enough of a basis and concern given the subject of anxiety by the authors of the email about being victimised as whistleblowers. I thought that an open ended question to the author of the series in publication that are in question, [the author], is merited and, at the very least, a request to be able to contact [the author's] head of department or person connected to their institution to gather more information on their research activities. My colleagues thought that this was unreasonably intrusive with no names or specific accusation. As a result, we have not advanced".

As for our journal, we managed to find some email and postal addresses for the author, by searching online and going back through previous submission records. An article by the author was submitted and published in 2004, and the editor of our journal has mentioned that the paper "could easily be fabricated". The editorial office sent a message to the author expressing concern about the integrity of a paper that was published in their journal and asked the author to respond as soon as possible. This email was sent out earlier this week, and one of the email addresses bounced, but the second one seems to have worked. We are now waiting for any sort of response.

Follow-up (September 2011):

One of the email addresses bounced, but others seemed to have got through, including one that was used by the author in a very recent paper. However, after several months we have not had any response. The author of the original email pointing out the odd pattern of author K's publications did contact the editor of our journal having noted that the case had been brought to COPE. He had no direct link to author K, had no special insight into his work and

was not from the same country as the author, but had come across the author's publications as he was working in a similar area. For reasons to do with his own experience as a scientist, he was sensitive to possible fraud which is why he felt obliged to bring his concerns to the attention of the journal editors. The editor of our journal was convinced he was sincere.

A retired UK allergist who said he knew author K contacted us to say that he believed that the author was a genuine scientist and would not undertake scientific fraud.

We asked the reviewers of the original paper whether they had any doubts about the authenticity of the work published in our journal in 2004 and they said that they had not had any concerns. However, the paper was a case series and the information could easily have been fabricated.

The next step is for the editor in chief of our journal to contact known associate editors in the same country as the author, using the following draft text: "Dear X, I write to you confidentially in your capacity as a trusted associate editor of xjournal. About a year ago, the xjournal editorial team were asked to look into a paper published by author K in xjournal in 2004. Many of author K's papers are single author and contain intriguing observations, and the paper in xjournal fits this description. Although of course we have no evidence to suggest there are any irregularities, we are duty bound to look into the matter. We have tried to contact author K by email at several addresses without any success. I would much appreciate it if you would let me know if you have contact details for him or his departmental colleagues, so that we can correspond with him. This is clearly a very sensitive issue and I would appreciate your treating it as confidential".

These associate editors may know how to take this matter to the medical association within the country. The emails are now being sent and we are waiting for a response.

Follow-up (December 2011):

In July 2011 the editor-in-chief sent an email to some associate editors of the journal in the country where we believe the author is from. We have not had a response yet from these associate editors, and we may go to the medical association of that country soon, as this case has been going on for so long. The editor had an email from the whistleblower who pointed out there had been no new publications effectively since 2009. He also pointed out that there was a legitimate Dr K and wondered if the other person was an imposter.

11-10 Duplicate publication and alleged image manipulation

Anonymised text of the case:

The editorial office of journal A was contacted anonymously by an individual who made allegations against two papers, both published by the same author. Paper 1 was alleged to be a duplicate publication, with the paper previously having been published in journal B. The editorial office of journal A, in accordance with the COPE flowcharts, contacted the author informing them of the allegations and asking for a response/explanation. The author freely admitted to the duplicate publication and paper 1 is in the process of being retracted.

The allegation against paper 2 was image manipulation consisting of false bands being included in an assay figure. The editorial office reviewed the images and believes that they

have been manipulated. As such they would like to retract the paper from journal A. When the author was contacted he admitted that some of the figures had been made by copy/paste but he maintained that the conclusions of the article are correct.

Numerous other journals have been contacted about similar alleged misconduct by this author, who believes that the accusations must be politically motivated.

The editorial office carried out further investigation of other papers published by the same author in journal A and found another instance of apparent image manipulation (paper 3). When contacted, the author made the same statement as above. When a co-author of this paper at another institution was contacted for his position, he defended the corresponding author and stated that it was inconceivable to him that serious claims of scientific misconduct made by an unidentified accuser could be applied here. Moreover, he claimed that none of the experiments was performed in his laboratory.

As the author denied any real wrongdoing, but to the editorial team it seems quite obvious that the figures have been manipulated, the editors of journal A contacted the author's institution and asked for a response within 3 months. They have not received a reply from the institution.

The editorial team is certain that the figures have been manipulated to provide false data and would therefore like to retract the relevant articles (papers 2 and 3) despite the author's denial of any wrongdoing and no contact from the author's institution. In consultation with the publisher for journal A, it is felt that the best way to proceed would be to issue a non-specific notice of retraction for the relevant papers, thus avoiding potential charges of defamation.

Would the Forum agree with this course of action or does it have any other views?

Advice:

The Forum questioned whether the editor had contacted the correct person at the institution. Ideally the case should be investigated by the institution so perhaps the editor should keep pursuing the institution. The editor could send a registered letter if email has elicited no response. If there is a funding body or ethics committee, this could be another avenue to pursue.

Ideally the editor should issue an expression of concern and then issue a retraction if there is evidence of misconduct after an investigation has been conducted by the institution. The Forum would advise against issuing a non-specific notice of retraction. However, if there is no response from the institution and the editor wants to retract the article, he should state all of the facts in the retraction notice, in a non-accusatory way, with his reasons for retraction, and mention that the institution has failed to respond.

As one of the authors is from a different institution, another suggestion was to contact that institution and request an investigation on the basis that all authors should take responsibility for published work.

Follow up:

The articles involved were retracted from the journal.

11-11 Lack of trial registration leads to new concerns about study conduct and ethical review/approval

Anonymised text of the case:

Following publication of an article, the editors noticed that the paper reported results of a clinical trial, but no details of trial registration were included in the article. (The journal does have careful checks on trial registration by staff at submission but this paper was not well written and it took careful reading to work out that it did in fact report on a clinical trial).

We contacted the authors to request details on trial registration and the study protocol, which are journal requirements for clinical trials. The senior author (co-chair A of his institution) eventually acknowledged that the trial had not been registered and they provided a document for the study protocol which we considered unsatisfactory. The authors at that stage requested ‘withdrawal’ of the article.

We replied to the authors to indicate we had the intention of issuing a notice of concern based on lack of trial registration. Given the new issue about the lack of a satisfactory protocol for the study reported, we then requested a copy of the letter of approval issued by the ethics committee/institutional review board cited in the article. Around this time, we were spontaneously contacted by co-chair B of the authors’ institution (who is not an author on the paper) expressing serious concerns over the work reported given that:

- (1) they considered the description of the work as potentially misleading given it fulfilled the criteria for a clinical trial; and
- (2) the ethics committee/institutional review board cited in the article does not exist at the authors’ institution.

Co-chair B indicated they would like to remain anonymous but would be willing to publicly outline their concerns as part of an internal investigation if a formal request for an enquiry was sent to the institution. We did not hear back from the authors for some time after our request for a copy of the ethics committee approval, so we posted a comment on the article to make the readers aware about the fact that the article did not adhere to the journal’s requirements for clinical trials and replied to the authors to explain the implications of a retraction—versus a ‘withdrawal’—and also reiterate the request for the letter of approval issued by the ethics committee.

In a further development, the authors finally then contacted us to say that the study was not in fact done at their institution but in a separate part of the country, that they did have approval from an ethics committee other than the one stated in the paper and provided a copy of that ethical approval in a non-English language. They provided no explanation for the discrepancies in study setting and ethical approval. It is not clear to us who recruited the participants as no authors seem to be based at the institution now claimed as providing ethical approval.

We have been unable to independently verify the authenticity of the claimed ethical approval and have concerns about the discrepancies in the various accounts of what took place. We think it is important to retract the paper and propose to do that, highlighting the lack of trial registration, lack of an appropriate protocol and that the ethics committee named in the article did not seem to give approval.

Is it adequate to proceed to retract the article on the basis of the concerns raised and the lack of an adequate response from the authors, given that we have been unable to establish whether the trial did or did not receive ethical approval? We also propose to submit a formal request for investigation to co-chair B of the institution (who currently wishes to be an anonymous complainant) and update the retraction later should we receive further clarification from them.

Advice:

The Forum agreed that the editor certainly has enough grounds to issue an expression of concern. However, most agreed with the suggestion that the editor should submit a formal request for an investigation to be carried out by the institution. If the investigation provides evidence of misconduct, then the editor should retract the paper.

However, some of the Forum argued that there are already grounds for retraction and that retraction is justified on the basis of the lack of appropriate protocol, lack of trial registration and possible lack of ethics committee approval. Hence, although ideally a formal investigation should be conducted and the editor should wait for the outcome, if the institution does not respond or if the response is unsatisfactory, the editor should retract the paper anyway.

Follow up:

The editor wrote to the co-chair of the institution to ask for a formal investigation, and received an acknowledgement to say this would be done. The editor has not yet received any further details from them but is following up to find out more.

The journal plans to issue an expression of concern and have had to set up the ability to do this as a new type of article in their production systems.

Follow up (December 2011):

We heard from the institution's investigation committee, which determined that the trial had not been conducted by the authors of the paper published in our journal. Rather, the authors of our paper had received samples from the investigators who had conducted the trial, and were reporting results of analyses done on those samples. The individual named in the investigation committee report as the principal investigator for the trial was not named in the manuscript published in our journal, either as an author or as an acknowledged person. The investigation committee reported that the oversight and conduct of the trial had been appropriate, but that ethics approval had in fact been given by a different ethics committee than the one named in the manuscript published.

The investigation committee reported that the trial, funded by a vaccine/biological company, had in fact been carried out at the company, recruiting as participants employees of the company. We were not aware of this fact when we published the paper and the setting and participant recruitment for the trial were not well described in the manuscript. The investigation committee reported that they would not have expected this study to have been registered as a trial, bearing in mind their country's local laws. This was because the intervention used in the trial was an approved medicinal product (vaccine)—essentially it was a postmarketing study. In that country, such studies do not need to be registered.

The journal editors have decided to proceed with an expression of concern, noting that the ethics committee named in the paper as giving approval in fact did not, and that a different

ethics committee gave approval. We plan to describe the setting for recruitment of participants and state that the company employees were participants. We would like to state that the trial was not registered and should have been, under our journal's criteria and ICMJE criteria, even though it may not have been a legal requirement in that country.

11-18 Retraction or correction?

Anonymised text of the case:

A reader contacted us with evidence that a number of western blots in a manuscript published by us in 2007 had been duplicated from other published papers; in one case, the same gel was duplicated in the paper itself. I compared the original papers and agreed with the reader. Some of the blots had also been duplicated in other papers but all had been published previous to being published in our journal. In the meantime, I received a forwarded email from the reader in which the editor of another journal, apparently involved, told this reader that the two affected papers in its journal were being retracted by the author.

I then contacted the two senior authors, Dr X and Dr Y (both listed as corresponding authors), as well as the heads of department (two departments listed) of Dr X. I could not find similar information for the institute of Dr Y (I later learned that Dr Y is the president of that university). I presented the evidence I had received and requested an explanation.

Dr X contacted me to say that he had started to investigate the issue a few weeks earlier (presumably after being contacted by one of the other journals). He said that it appeared that all "scientific wrongdoings identified so far" were caused by his laboratory staff. Although he had recently reproduced the data published in our journal and in other journals, "the mistakes have already appeared in these papers". He said he was willing to take full responsibility for this 'misconduct' and had decided to withdraw all papers involved, including the one in our journal. Dr Y contacted me to say that he and all the other co-authors agreed that Dr X would take responsibility for answering the required questions. I did not hear from either of the heads of the institutes.

I then emailed Dr X, copying in Dr Y and the heads of the institutes, with suggested text for the retraction, asking him to make any changes he felt necessary. He instead wrote back to ask that we consider allowing him to publish a correction, showing the correct bands for each of the relevant experiments. He said that the results in the paper are accurate, and he had all of the original data available for inspection. He had also reproduced the experiments, achieving the same results. He cited a number of papers by other groups in which some of his findings had been replicated. He again admitted that there was 'misuse' of bands, and gave a number of explanations for what might have happened (based on inexperience of his technicians). He said that, ultimately, however, he took full responsibility for what happened, but would like the opportunity to publish a correction. Dr Y also emailed me to support Dr X's request, vouching for Dr X as an honest scientist. Again, I have not heard from the heads of the institutes.

Although I think, in principle, the article should be retracted because of redundant publication of data, does it best serve readers if the conclusions are, in fact, sound? This paper has been well cited in the literature, and some results do indeed seem to have been reproduced by others.

I would very much appreciate advice on whether we should retract this article, issue a notice of redundant publication or involve the original handling (academic) editor and the editor-in-chief. In the latter case, I would most likely ask Dr X's institute to verify the results based on the documentation provided by Dr X, and then ask the the editor and editor-in-chief for their opinions. If the editor and editor-in-chief agree that the data are still sound, then we would issue a correction.

Advice:

The Forum suggested that this was a case not only of redundant publication but also of image manipulation and fraud and agreed with the editor that the paper should be retracted. The author admitted wrongdoing, the editor has the evidence, and if he believes there are grounds for retraction, then he should retract the paper. However, the Forum did caution that it was unusual not to wait for the results of the investigation being carried out by the institution. Although the author blamed his laboratory staff and claimed the data were sound, the Forum agreed that the editor does not have to include this information in the retraction notice. In any event, the principal investigator is ultimately responsible for the data and if the gels were duplicated then clearly the principal investigator was not involved enough in the study. The Forum agreed this was a difficult case but the editor had handled it correctly.

Follow up:

We retracted the article on the basis of redundant publication and image manipulation, avoiding any finger pointing. The institute completed their investigation and told us that they would have requested that we retract the article anyway. The PI was fired from his post.

11-20 Duplicate publication allegation

Anonymised text of the case:

Our journal (journal A) received a complaint from a 'Clare Francis' alerting us to a case of duplicate publication involving our journal and another (journal B). The article in journal A was published first, but submitted after the article in journal B. Clare Francis requested that the article in journal A should be withdrawn as it is duplicate publication. However, the article in journal B was an extended abstract, included in a section of selected conference proceedings. Our records do not go back far enough to check whether the authors informed us of this but they did not reference their abstract in the article in journal A. The article in journal A is a full paper, with a materials and methods section, detailed results and enough information for someone else to replicate the experiment. The extended abstract in B was not. When we contacted the editor of journal B, we were informed that they had received several such complaints from Clare Francis which have turned out to be somewhat spurious.

A simple Google search revealed that 'Clare Francis' is a widely known self-styled whistleblower in scientific publication.

We responded that we had looked in detail at both papers and did not consider it to be a case of duplicate publication, and that we considered the matter closed. Clare Francis did not agree, and reiterated the issue of the article submission timings, insisting that the paper be withdrawn, and seeming to ignore the substance of what had actually been published. 'She' appealed to our status as a member of COPE as a reason that we should take on board these concerns.

We believe not only that using a pseudonym to pursue these matters is unethical, but that we

have followed the correct procedure and have made the correct decision regarding these papers. We would be interested in hearing if the Forum agrees (on the former points, if not the latter).

Advice:

The Forum agreed with the editor that it would not consider prior publication of an extended abstract as duplicate publication, unless the extended abstract was very detailed and included lots of data, which was not the case in this instance. The editor made the right decision. COPE supports a whistleblower's right to remain anonymous and would encourage editors to respond to any allegations of unethical behaviour as long as there is specific evidence and not just vague accusations.

Follow up:

We replied to Clare Francis saying we had been to COPE and were satisfied that we had done the right thing, and we are not going to change our course of action. She responded along much the same lines as the original complaint—we did not respond and consider the matter closed.

11-22 Transparency of peer review to co-authors

Anonymised text of the case:

An associate editor of one of our journals has asked whether we can configure our online peer review system to restrict access to reviewer correspondence to corresponding authors. His concern is that some of the review materials (eg, a harsh critique) might be embarrassing for the principal investigator if accessed by a co-author who was a junior investigator or laboratory technician. Similarly, he thinks that a cover letter that requests exclusion of reviewers could be embarrassing to the principal investigator if read by certain co-authors.

Our editor in chief is not convinced by this editor's arguments and prefers transparency to all co-authors. He suggests that the principal investigator should explain to junior co-authors that scientific publishing is similar to making sausages—the process is a little messy but the final product is usually good.

Is there any consensus as to whether all co-authors or only the corresponding author should be permitted to access review materials?

Advice:

The Forum was unanimous that there should be no restriction of reviewer comments to authors. The process should be transparent. All authors bear responsibility for their paper. It is up to senior authors to explain the process to junior authors, and this can be a good learning tool. Also, the Forum noted that ideally the journal should communicate with all of the authors and not just the corresponding author. This may prevent some cases of guest authorship arising. However, the Forum agreed that publishers may edit reviewers' comments before sending them to authors if they contain rude or libellous remarks. The publisher should keep the original reviewer comments on file for internal use but it is acceptable to send a 'cleaned up' version to the authors.

Follow up:

The editor-in-chief agreed with the recommendations and communicated them to the editor who had raised the question. No change was made to the peer review system.