

# Ethical Editing

Volume 1, Issue 2

Summer 2009

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM | C | O | P | E | COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATION ETHICS



## Patchwork family

As a child growing up in the suburban United States in the 70's, I was a devoted viewer of the television situation comedy "The Brady Bunch", which catalogued the domestic trials of a woman with three daughters who married a man with three sons. The Bradys were a classic stepfamily (now more often referred to as a "blended family" or "patchwork family"), and the series portrayed the process through which individuals with different habits, rules, and standards learn to function as a single unit—a family.

What's the connection between the Brady family and the Committee on Publication Ethics? In 2008, the COPE "family" expanded dramatically, and each of the new members brought along its own expectations and needs. COPE's mission, as described on its home page, is "Helping journals to get their houses in order." Now COPE is faced with the challenge of bringing its members together under one roof.

In the previous issue of *Ethical Editing* we examined the need for COPE. This issue looks at some differences between medicine and the other disciplines, and highlights what makes the COPE members unique, in the hope that recognizing differences is the first step toward creating commonalities.

On the following page you'll find the results of the March and April elections (Elizabeth Wager has stepped into the shoes of Harvey Marcovitch, not only as the new head of the COPE family, but also as Editor-in-Chief of *Ethical Editing*), and throughout this issue you'll find information presented at the March 27 COPE seminar. On page 3 John Hoey covers conflicts of interest and Margaret Rees provides strategies small journals can use to combat ethical problems. The Feature, "Strange Bedfellows", offers the perspectives of the editors of a medical journal based in Iran, a geology journal based in Scotland, and a mathematics journal based in the United States. "From the Field" presents existing standards in a range of industries. And finally, in "Sedation Vacation" Liz Wager takes a tongue-in-cheek look at what's in a name.

For all patchwork families, designing a set of rules everyone can live with is a challenge. It's clear that developing an approach to ethical issues for COPE's diverse members will take time. Yet in spite of the differences between the journals, they have at least one similarity: their editors believe that ethical publishing is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

*Jeannie*

**Theme: Under one roof**

### Inside this issue

COPE elections	page 2
John Hoey on conflicts of interest	page 3
Strange bedfellows	page 4
Industry standards	page 6
A COPE is a COPE is...	page 7
Last words and pix	page 8

### Masthead

*Ethical Editing* is published four times a year by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Registered Charity No. 1123023, registered in England and Wales, Company No. 6389120. Registered office: Shieling House, 30 Invincible Road, Farnborough, Hampshire GU14 7QU, United Kingdom

**Editor-in-Chief**  
Elizabeth Wager

**Editor**  
Jeannie Wurz

[www.publicationethics.org](http://www.publicationethics.org)

Send contributions to:  
[cope\\_editor@publicationethics.org](mailto:cope_editor@publicationethics.org)

## The Scoop from COPE

### COPE's new Council

Following three years on the COPE Council, COPE Chair Harvey Marcovitch stepped down on March 27, 2009. In honor of his service, he was presented with a humorous flowchart titled "On Deciding to Resign as Chair of COPE. Including the Lamentations and Pleadings of the Remaining Council Members." Marcovitch was succeeded by Elizabeth (Liz) Wager, who was elected Secretary in 2007. Liz, in turn, was succeeded by Council member Richard



Outgoing COPE Chair  
Harvey Marcovitch



New COPE Chair Liz  
Wager

O'Hagan, who will fill the position of Secretary until elections are held again in March 2010. Sabine Kleinert was reelected as Vice Chair, a position she has held since March 2006. In a separate election, four Council members were re-elected to a second 3-year term of office in April: Steve Yentis, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Anaesthesia* (London); Ginny Barbour, a founding editor of *PLoS Medicine* (London); Margaret Rees, Editor-in-Chief of *Maturitas* (Oxford); and Charlotte Haug, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association* (Oslo, Norway). In addition, the Council seat vacated in advance by Pritpal Tamber was filled by COPE's first non-European member: James Greenstone, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations* (Fort Worth, Texas, USA). For biographies of the Council members see [www.publicationethics.org/about/council](http://www.publicationethics.org/about/council).



New Council member James  
Greenstone

**Not-so-distant learning** In April 2009, COPE signed a contract with Astute Technology, Reston, Virginia, USA, which will develop COPE's new distance learning program (for members only). A new working group will be created to manage the project, and in particular, the development and writing of the content for each learning module. It is expected that the program will cover key topics such as plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, redundant publication, selective reporting, unethical research, reviewer and editor misconduct, and conflicts of interest. The aim is to have the program ready for evaluation and user testing by the end of 2009.

### Successful seminar on March 27, 2009

Around 80 editors attended COPE's annual seminar, held in London on March 27, 2009. The one-day program featured four speakers and two break-out sessions, with the morning focusing on "The ethics of editing" and the afternoon addressing the question: "Is publication ethics a luxury which small journals can't afford?" In the break-out sessions, attendees read and discussed four cases from the COPE archives, covering the issues of potential competing interest, authorship dispute, alleged plagiarism, and allegation of reviewer malpractice. The seminar featured the official launch of COPE's new newsletter, as well as a summary of the organization's recent projects. "It's been an extraordinary year for COPE," said outgoing Chairman Harvey Marcovitch. Highlights of the seminar are presented throughout this issue of *Ethical Editing*.



Seema Kang of *The Lancet* presents the key points resulting from her group's discussion of an ethical case.

### Mischief, malfeasance and incompetence: the editor's enemies

It's not every presentation that starts off with the speaker being introduced as a fired editor. John Hoey, former Editor of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, didn't seem fazed. In fact, his talk at COPE's annual seminar in London on March 27, 2009, showed that he's in good company. Hoey catalogued the woes of a number of his peers, among them George Lundberg (fired by *JAMA*) and Jerome Kassirer (*New England Journal of Medicine*).



Hoey's task was to address the topic of conflict of interest. He began by introducing a "pyramid of problems" faced by journal editors, with the relatively uncommon "mischief" at the top, "conflict of interest" in the middle, and incompetence and carelessness forming

the much broader base. The problem of incompetence is more often seen by smaller journals, which can't afford to be as selective ("a lot of the time we were just trying to find something to publish") and thus have to deal with less experienced authors, Hoey said.

There are many opportunities for conflict of interest in journal publishing. Readers pay money to journal owners in the form of subscriptions, research sponsors pay authors to perform research, and journals are paid to produce supplements and run advertorials. Problems can arise when the needs of authors, readers, journal owners, sponsoring societies, advertisers and research sponsors conflict.

Hoey cited the lack of an explicit contract as a factor contributing to his disagreement with the Canadian Medical Association: "They hadn't just handed me the keys to the car; there were restrictions." He now serves as an Associate Editor for an open access journal, *Open Medicine* ([www.openmedicine.ca/](http://www.openmedicine.ca/)), which publishes all content at no cost to readers or authors, does not take pharmaceutical advertising, and is staffed entirely by volunteers.

In some fields, financial conflicts may be only a minor problem. Another type of conflict is reporting bias. This can include non-publication of negative results,

reporting of only selected outcomes, publishing the same results or data in multiple publications, publishing negative findings in a less-read language, delaying publication of negative findings, and selectively citing findings. As an example of outcome bias, Hoey cited a study on diabetes funded by the Canadian government. The publication's authors reported that "Intensive multitherapy for patients with poorly controlled type 2 diabetes is successful in helping patients meet most of the goals set by a national diabetes association," although in actuality, 6 months after intensive therapy stopped and patients returned to usual care, the benefits had vanished. The authors "didn't understand that this wasn't ethical," Hoey said.

Requiring authors to disclose financial conflicts of interest, to use reporting guidelines (see [www.equator-network.org](http://www.equator-network.org)), and to state who was responsible for various aspects of a study are strategies for dealing with ethical problems. However, a Canadian study (not yet published) looking at 11 ideal practices for mitigating conflicts of interest found that only 6% of 742 investigators met all 11 practices. "Ethics is a moving target," Hoey said. "What we would have thought was unethical 10 years ago is not the same as today."

#### Strategies for small journals

All journals have the same ethical duties, regardless of size, says Margaret Rees, Editor-in-Chief of *Maturitas*. Yet small journals generally have fewer resources for combatting ethical problems. Rees identified some preventive strategies:

- Provide editors with training and designated time for editorial responsibilities in addition to their regular employment
- Expand the editorial board and regularly review its composition
- Provide clear instructions for authors, detailing what is unacceptable, and regularly review them
- Expand the reviewer base and give reviewers a checklist for peer review
- Maintain accurate documentation of authorship
- Be prepared to take action, e.g., contact the author's institution, if there is no ethical approval
- Liaise with editors of other journals

# Strange bedfellows: differences in the disciplines

1) *Job shop scheduling optimization through multiple independent particle swarms.* 2) *Neonaticide: phenomenology and considerations for prevention.* 3) *The subarctometatarsus: intermediate metatarsus architecture demonstrating the evolution of the arctometatarsus and advanced agility in theropod dinosaurs.* It's hard to imagine that any three articles—and by extension, journals—could be more different. And yet all three titles were published in 2009 in journals belonging to COPE. It's not just subject matter that distinguishes the 5000-plus COPE member journals; there are also major differences in size, staffing, affiliation, language, location, and approaches to editorial problems. This issue's feature highlights a few of those differences.

## Professionalizing the editorial process in Iran

Lack of professionalism is often a problem for small journals, according to Behrooz Astaneh, Deputy Editor of the *Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences*. At COPE's annual seminar on March 27, 2009, Astaneh described some of the general problems faced by such journals, and highlighted recent attempts to use professionalism as a solution to ethical concerns faced by journal editors in Iran.



According to Astaneh, small journals generally have low circulations and long intervals for publication. Most small journal editors are nonprofessionals, he said, and very often, if they are academics and need to be promoted, their independence as an editor will be compromised. Many small journals have a sponsor, he said, and this may affect the publication process, leading, for example, to an editor ignoring a conflict of interest or publishing articles which do not meet the required publication criteria.

More than 140 medical journals are published in Iran. Most are small, and all are sponsored by Iranian research centers or medical universities. 99% are quarterly, and most are produced in Persian. However, as the number of Iranian journals published in English rises, plagiarism may become an increasing problem. Because of the language barrier, some Iranian authors submitting manuscripts in English may plagiarize to overcome their lack of English proficiency, believes Astaneh. At the same time, many Iranian editors “don't know anything about plagiarism,”

he said, a fact he discovered while leading more than 50 workshops in Iran.

The number of English-language journals in Iran is likely to increase in response to the recent, concerted effort to professionalize Iran's publishing system. Over the past three years, workshops on medical journalism have been offered to editors, editorial board members, and faculty members of Iranian medical universities and research centers, covering such topics as basics of medical journalism, how to write, internal screening, peer review, critical appraisal, ethical misconduct, copy editing, and English for academic purposes. And beginning in 2009, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences will offer a Master's of Science degree in Medical Journalism, with courses on epidemiology, biostatistics, online production, magazine production, advanced English (general and medical), medical news and feature writing (English and Persian), computer skills, media law, journalism skills, scientific and copy editing, design and layout, and search engines. The goal is to reduce the dependence of journals on part-time editors, who are less likely to be editorially independent. “We hope that in 5 to 10 years we can train many editors who can work in journal offices as full-time editors, and this will change the face of medical publishing,” Astaneh said.

## Small journal, big world

What kinds of problems are encountered by the editor of a very small, nonbiomedical journal? At the March 27 seminar, Randell Stephenson, Editor of the *Journal of Geodynamics*, presented a basic science editor's view of the world.

The *Journal of Geodynamics* focuses on the processes driving plate tectonics, observation of the surface of the earth—or more simply, “looking at

rocks,” Stephenson said. It is produced as 10 online issues per year, each with 60 pages. There is no editorial office; there is no editorial assistant; there is no copy editor. There is an editorial board, but they don’t



handle editing—they serve mainly as reviewers. And occasionally there are board members who don’t want to leave the board, yet never seem to have time to review.

The journal publishes original research articles—“At least we hope they’re originals!”—letters, short reports, reviews, “and we certainly do have discussion,” said Stephenson. Although the journal was founded in 1982 to fill a void, it now has a direct competitor. Submissions have increased from countries like China, India, Turkey and Iran. Many “are quite bad in their English and presentation,” Stephenson said, which leads him to believe that many manuscripts from these countries “are rejected by major journals without ever being read.”

The ethical problems Stephenson has experienced in his 2.5-year tenure fall primarily into two categories: authorship complaints and—in particular—reviewer bias. Some reviewers intentionally delay the review process, or agree to review only so that they can kill a paper, he said. In one case, said Stephenson, he sent a paper to a reviewer, who returned a rejection in 4 minutes. “It’s got to do with competition for meager funds.”

The *Journal of Geodynamics* doesn’t ask authors to sign a conflict of interest statement, and fraud doesn’t seem to be a problem in the field. Papers contain pure scientific knowledge, and many of the data being used already exist in the public domain. Randomized controlled trials don’t exist. There’s not much scope for commercial conflicts of interest, said Stephenson, and “falsifying data wouldn’t really benefit anyone.”

Yet in spite of the fact that small, nonbiomedical journals may be faced with fewer ethical issues than their medical counterparts, Stephenson stressed that there can be no difference in the journals’ attitudes: regardless of the size or focus of a journal, ethical publishing “is not a luxury”.

### Mathematical divide

In February 2009, Lance Small, Editor of the COPE member journal *Communications in Algebra*, wrote to COPE: “I am somewhat perplexed by your e-mails and communications . . . Your Committee seems to be made up solely of persons in the biomedical area and resident in the EU. COPE covers neither the issues that occur in mathematics and the physical sciences, nor do I have any indication that EU law and practice correspond with that in the US.”

According to Small, these two major differences make it difficult for COPE to be of use to a non-European mathematics editor: “The physical sciences, particularly math, seem to me to be very different from medicine and biology.” Furthermore, “the laws in the US on issues of plagiarism and libel may be quite different from those in the UK and EU.”

*Communications in Algebra* is a monthly journal publishing original research in the field of algebra. Reviewing is unblinded, with one reviewer per paper, and the journal accepts approximately 25% of submissions. Authors do not pay for publication. It is acceptable for authors to submit two papers simultaneously on related aspects of the same topic. Lack of English “does not contribute to plagiarism,” says Small. Referees help with editing, and in any case “we’re primarily concerned with the math.”

Among the issues Small has recently encountered are multiple submissions (authors sending a rejected paper to another editor of the same journal, hoping for a better result) and phantom authors (adding well-known mathematicians as authors to give a paper enhanced credibility).

Small believes that some ethical standards in mathematics publishing have changed over the years. “Many years ago it was common practice to grant editors the privilege of accepting their own papers for publication. Nowadays this rarely happens,” he said. “Should an editor handle a paper written by his student? Of course not! Answers seem easier now.”

Lance Small recommends *The Little Book of Plagiarism* by Richard A. Posner, a judge of the US Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals—just below the Supreme Court. “Posner writes well and clearly lays out differences between copying, say, and plagiarism.”

## SOP's across industries

Standard operating procedures are used in a range of industries to improve organizational results. COPE journal editors looking to create standards for their industry can benefit from exchanging information with their peers and from studying guidelines published by other disciplines.

### Guidelines for mathematicians

The American Mathematical Society ([www.ams.org](http://www.ams.org)), founded in 1888, has more than 32,000 individual members and 550 institutional members in the United States and around the world. In 1995 the Society adopted ethical guidelines reflecting "its expectations of behavior both for AMS members, as well as for all individuals and institutions in the wider mathematical community, including those engaged in the education or employment of mathematicians or in the publication of mathematics." Among the topics covered are plagiarism, authorship, conflict of interest, confidentiality, censorship, and responsibility to the mathematical community. Contact: Robert Daverman, AMS Secretary: [daverman@math.utk.edu](mailto:daverman@math.utk.edu)

### A lack of letters

Apparently, however, guidelines differ between disciplines. Although the COPE Council agreed at its March 2009 meeting that member journals are not complying with COPE's code of conduct if they do not allow correspondence or if they have no means of encouraging debate, an informal survey highlighted the fact that mathematics is not medicine:

"During my over 40 years of tenure as Editor-in-Chief of three journals, I published a total of perhaps three Letters to the Editor. None of these had anything to do with our official subject matter."  
Ervin Rodin, Editor-in-Chief, *Applied Mathematics Letters*

"The official aims of the *Journal* do explicitly mention that letters can be submitted. However, during my time as editor no letters have been received. So, there is the route of 'letters to the editor', it is only that mathematicians appear not to choose this route."

Robert Aykroyd, Editor, *Journal of Applied Statistics*

### Guardians of quality

*One way to reduce the need for correspondence is to set high standards for the editorial process. The International Journal of Intelligent Computing and Cybernetics (<http://ijicc.buaa.edu.cn>), based in China, considers its reviewers to be key:*

"Reviewers should see themselves as protectors of the quality of the IJICC journal, as well as of the reputation of the authors who submit papers. It is the reviewer's responsibility to make sure that only high quality papers are published, and that the author(s) are protected from putting poor work into print. From this perspective, the reviewer should not only read the papers thoroughly to find flaws, but should also make recommendations to the author(s) as to how the paper might be improved."

### Corroboration required

*At the March 27 COPE seminar, the editor of an inorganic materials journal stressed that in his field, inaccurate research rarely becomes established in the literature:*

"Anything we publish isn't going to be taken notice of until it's been published independently by a number of other groups. That's

one of the big differences between us and medical journals. . . . We would require [research] to be repeated, completely independently, by several scientists."

### Applying existing guidelines

*Numerous organizations publish guidelines, which can be adapted for other disciplines:*

Many medical journals subscribe to The Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals (also known as the Vancouver guidelines), which are published by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors ([www.icmje.org/](http://www.icmje.org/)).

The Council of Science Editors publishes *Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*. It can be purchased online from [www.councilscienceeditors.org/publications/style.cfm](http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/publications/style.cfm).

In the coming months the COPE Council will be evaluating how well its Best Practice Guidelines (<http://publicationethics.org/code-conduct>) apply to nonmedical journals. Stay tuned.

### Misapplying existing guidelines

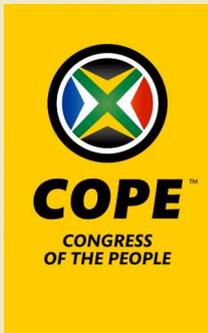
*Unfortunately, the existence of standards doesn't ensure compliance—or understanding:*

A recently submitted paper on ventilation in pigs stated that "the study was performed according to the Helsinki convention guidelines." It was pointed out to the authors that the Helsinki guidelines ([www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm](http://www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm)) set ethical standards for research in humans, not animals.

# A COPE is a COPE is a . . . COPE?

by Liz Wager

What has the Committee on Publication Ethics got to do with South African politics? Until fairly recently, the answer was absolutely nothing at all. But COPE has been unceremoniously ousted from premier position on Google searches by COPE (the Congress of the People), and if that's not bad enough, Linda Gough, the hard-working COPE Administrator (the real COPE, that is—the one you belong to if you're reading this newsletter) now has to fend off a small but steady trickle of e-mail enquiries from democratically minded South Africans. Never have I taken such a close interest in African politics, hoping, fervently, that COPE (the South African one, that is) might suffer a downturn in popularity, or, better still, split or merge, so it would have to change its name and we could regain our Google sovereignty.



Africa isn't the only continent challenging our claim to the acronym. The editor of this newsletter was puzzled when a Chinese editor described COPE as “a publication platform for journals.” Could he have been referring to COPE ('Create Once, Publish Everywhere'), which sounds like the marching song of the redundant publication movement but is, apparently, something to do with electronic publishing.

Thanks to a website that claims to list over 4 million abbreviations and acronyms, I now know that COPE also stands for the Coalition of Progressive Electors of Vancouver, a town I'll be visiting later this year (ostensibly for the peer review congress, but just maybe for some sleuthing and subtle nominal sabotage).

In Laos, COPE stands for the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise, which provides mobility devices to disabled people, while in Texas, COPE represents the Coalition of Prison Evangelists—no doubt complete with tambourines. In the UK, I'm relieved to see that our main competition comes from the Confederation of Organisers of Packaging Exhibitions—who no doubt are as mystified by the

need for a committee on publication ethics as I am of such a confederation. I mean, how many organizers of packaging exhibitions can there be?

In Brazil, COPE is the rather scary-sounding Centro de Operações Policiais Especiais, or Center for Special Police Operations, which reminds me of a bizarre e-mail exchange I once had on the WAME list-serv with an Indian editor who was horrified that the Committee on Publication Ethics had an acronym that meant a British policeman.



This misunderstanding ran for some time until I explained that COPE rhymes with 'hope' (or 'soap'), while 'cop' is short for copper and rhymes with 'top'.



But my favorite discovery is that, according to no less than the Boy Scouts of America, COPE is in fact a Challenging Outdoor Personal Experience. I can't help thinking that they included the word 'Personal' just to make the acronym work (has anybody ever had

a challenging impersonal outdoor experience?), and anyone who has heard Tom Lehrer's wonderful song 'Be Prepared' ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSwjuz\\_yao](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSwjuz_yao)) will know why I am smirking slightly as I type.

When I was elected Chair, I didn't imagine it would involve adrenaline-fueled endurance sports, but if I embark on a white-water rafting team-building trip for Council, we'll definitely call it the COPE COPE.



### Help wanted with PR

Could your journal or company help COPE with some practical support? We're looking for someone to volunteer as COPE's Press Officer, helping us issue occasional COPE press releases—approximately 4 to 6 per year. COPE would write the releases; you would send them to appropriate contacts and electronic alert systems. Or perhaps you know a suitably qualified person who would be interested in taking an active (volunteer) role in preparing press releases and suggesting PR opportunities arising from COPE activities. COPE's Operations Director, Tim Feest, would be delighted to hear from you: [cope\\_opsdirector@publicationethics.org](mailto:cope_opsdirector@publicationethics.org).

### Words from the wise

"There can be hope only for a society which acts as one big family, and not as many separate ones."

Anwar al-Sadat, 3rd President of Egypt (1918-1981)

### Last laugh

by Annemarie Glaser



It soon became clear that a blanket approach to publication ethics wouldn't work

### Worth a 1000 words

The 1998 Friendship Quilt produced by members of the Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas demonstrates that it's possible for groups of different sizes from different countries and with different concepts of "home" to work together to create an object that celebrates both uniqueness and unity. Likewise, in spite of their differences, the 5000-plus member journals belonging to the COPE family will become stronger as a result of being brought together under one roof.



### Truth will out

"I can be expected to look for truth but not to find it," wrote the French philosopher Denis Diderot in 1746. More than 250 years later, Diderot's words appear especially apt in view of ethical abuses and major fraud uncovered in scientific research and publishing. "How ethical are for-profit institutional review boards?" asked an editorial in *The Lancet* reporting that Coast IRB of Colorado Springs, CO, USA, reviewed 356 human research protocols in 5 years—and approved all of them ([www.thelancet.com](http://www.thelancet.com), Vol. 373, April 25 2009). In March 2009, *Anesthesiology News* reported that "Scott S. Reuben, MD, of Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, Mass., a pioneer in the area of multimodal analgesia, is said to have fabricated his results in at least 21 . . . articles dating back to 1996" (Fraud case rocks anesthesiology community. *Anesthesiology News* March 2009; 35:3). Likewise, in 2002 in the field of physics, German researcher Jan Hendrik Schön was fired by Bell Laboratories in New Jersey after he was found to have fabricated work on organic crystals which was published in, and later retracted by, the journals *Science*, *Physical Review B* and *Nature* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan\\_Hendrik\\_Schon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Hendrik_Schon).) Thus the April 28, 2009, release of the U.S. Institute of Medicine's report "Conflicts of Interest in Medical Research, Education and Practice" (<http://tinyurl.com/db7hkn>), calling for voluntary and regulatory measures to reduce conflicts of interest, should be welcome. Yet the report is generating concern among pharmaceutical companies and medical writers. Is truth a commodity to be bought and sold? We'll see.