Something’s brewing

In October 2002 I was hired as a free-lance writer to produce the proceedings of the inaugural meeting of an international cancer organization. The two-day meeting was held in Lyon, France, and attended by roughly 20 physicians and researchers from around the world. The meeting attendees gave well-prepared presentations, participated in lively discussions, and seemed energized by the idea of forming this new organization dedicated to helping patients in their field. Travel and hotel expenses for the attendees were paid by a nonprofit association, as was the dinner, held at Paul Bocuse’s luxury restaurant l’Auberge du Pont de Collonges, one of a small number of restaurants in France rated with three stars in the Michelin Guide. A few weeks after the meeting, while I was working on my report, the Executive Director of the nonprofit association resigned. One year later he was arrested and charged with embezzling $330,000 from the charity.

“Wining and dining” is a way of life in the world of business. Its goal is to further relationships. In academia, however, and particularly in medicine, it has the potential to create conflicts of interest. Should the Lyon attendees have paid their own ways to the meeting? Should they have booked their own rooms in affordable hotels? Should they have organized their own dinners? According to a 2009 report from the Institute of Medicine (see this issue’s Feature, “Playing the Publishing Game”), the answer appears to be “Yes”.

Increasingly, journals are requiring transparency from researchers who submit manuscripts. But misconduct, the theme of the Winter issue of Ethical Editing, takes many forms, ranging from sabotage of experimental research (described on page 4) to the apparent creation of phantom journals (see page 7). The problem is pervasive. Fortunately, the solutions are many, and many of them involve COPE.

This issue contains information about COPE’s plans for a publishers’ code of conduct, a summary of the Statement on Research Integrity created at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity in Singapore, a short report from the US Seminar on Plagiarism—and a whole lot more.

By the time you read these pages, the COPE Council will be meeting to discuss what else it can do for you. Three new Council members (see page 2) will be bringing new ideas and enthusiasm to the discussions. We thank you for taking the time to elect them, and hope you’ll join us in welcoming them in their new role.

Tea with a fabricated Audrey Hepburn

Theme: Misconduct

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Masthead

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COPE Council elections

Six COPE members applied for the three open positions on the COPE Council that were advertised in October 2010. The announcement stated that COPE was particularly interested in applications from journal editors with expertise in the humanities, law, and ethics, and in applications from non-native English speakers and publishers. Voting concluded on November 26th, and COPE is pleased to welcome the following new members of the Council:

Irene Hames has a PhD in cell biology and was Managing Editor of *The Plant Journal* from 1990 to 2010. She now works as an Editorial Consultant and is a COPE Associate member based in the UK. Irene is author of the book *Peer Review and Manuscript Management in Scientific Journals: Guidelines for Good Practice*.

Behrooz Astaneh, Acting Editor of the *Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences* and visiting editor of the *BMJ*, has an MD degree from Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Iran, and a degree in medical journalism from the University of Westminster, London. He is the founder of the first academic Master of Science course in medical journalism in Iran.

Geraldine Pearson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Connecticut Health Center (USA) and has held various roles, including President, in the International Society of Psychiatric Nurses. She is Editor of the journal *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*.

COPE website to have a new look and functions

The COPE website user testing conducted in July 2010 produced valuable feedback which is now being evaluated and incorporated into a new design for the website (www.publicationethics.org). Among the comments:

- The strapline “Helping journals to get their houses in order” is misleading
- The site is almost too modest in the way it describes itself
- There is nothing on the homepage that actually draws you into content
- It is not obvious what the Resources are and how they can help
- It can be difficult to find what you’re looking for unless you know where it is
- Many of the pages are too detailed and wordy (e.g. About Us)
- The introduction of images would make pages more pleasing
- It is not obvious what the difference is between the Blog and News
- Excellent use of external links throughout site, although there could be more internal linkage
- Searching the site is confusing and frustrating

Suggestions for changes included:

- The homepage needs to contain wording saying what the site is about, what it contains, and how it can help—e.g., COPE is THE international organization that assists editors in managing the integrity of work published in their journals. It is governed by X, Y and Z.
- The site also needs to promote the Resources available to editors better, e.g. “information that ALL editors should know is available here for downloading.”
- Facebook and Twitter icons should be added to the site, as it’s not currently obvious that they have a COPE presence
- The benefits of joining COPE need to be clearer

In particular, the homepage and search functions are being improved. COPE hopes to unveil a new website by February 1, 2011.

Thanks for service

We would like to offer our appreciation to outgoing Council members Richard O’Hagan and Trish Groves. Richard served as both Secretary and Treasurer during his three-year term, and Trish was very active in organizing the UK seminars. Thank you for your contributions to COPE!

Website statistics

The number of people who visited the site at least once (unique visitors) increased by 35% in September, but 60% of the site’s visitors left the site from the initial page they landed on. Search engines referred 49% of visitors. A large proportion of the site’s users come from Europe (2941), with the Americas close behind (2639), followed by Asia (1524). Both Facebook and Twitter are sending users to the site.
Publishers’ Code of Conduct

In addition to revising its existing Code of Conduct, COPE has been developing a new code which will specifically address the responsibilities of publishers. The idea for a separate publishers’ code arose after several major publishing houses decided to pay for all their journals to belong to COPE. COPE thought it was important to offer these publishers a framework for the ethical aspects of their operations, and the idea was well received at a publishers’ meeting hosted by COPE in December 2009.

A committee headed by COPE Council member Chris Graf, a publisher with Wiley-Blackwell in Oxford, was formed to begin work on the code. Rather than cover content or peer review or editorial oversight—areas which belong to editors—the new code will clearly identify the areas in which publishers have an impact on publication ethics, and make recommendations in those areas. “We’re aiming to provide publishers with a code for the things that publishers alone do that relate to publication ethics. In part this will be related to providing support for editors—and others,” said Graf.

Group members have met several times for telephone conferences. In November Graf described the group’s progress: “We reviewed the main COPE code of conduct together, agreed a format for the publishers’ code, drafted sections and—with significant help from one of the team (Melissa Junior from the American Society of Civil Engineers)—we compiled everyone’s thoughts into a preliminary first draft. We’ve circulated that draft to key people for review. Now we’re revising the preliminary draft to make it as simple and direct as possible before circulating more widely. We also need to make sure it will be as inclusive as possible: there are so many different sizes and types of publishing company that we need to craft a code that will be acceptable and will work in practical terms for as many of them as possible.”

Contributors to the publishers’ code of conduct as of mid-November included Niki Haunch, Valerie Robillard, and Eileen Breen from Emerald; Dan Huke from Sage; Phil Daly and Ian Burgess from Wolters Kluwer; Cathy Kennedy from Oxford University Press; Anthony Newman and Jessica Clark from Elsevier; Colin Bulpitt from Taylor & Francis; Francesca Iaria from Wiley-Blackwell; Pauline Starley from Portland Press; Elin Reeves from the European Respiratory Society Journal; Rainer Justke and Aldo de Pape from Springer; Melissa Norton from BioMed Central; Trish Groves from BMJ; Hannah Steer, Brenda Rouse, and David Bull from Palgrave; and Melissa Junior from ASCE.

A draft of the code was presented for comment at the COPE Council meeting on December 7, 2010.
Stemming the tide of misconduct

Reports of academic misconduct are on the rise. Yet so are attempts to ensure that research is conducted responsibly. Below: one example of misconduct and three approaches to promoting responsible research.

Cell-culture sabotage
In April 2010, with the help of hidden cameras, officials at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor obtained a confession from a post-doctoral student who had been contaminating the cell cultures of a graduate student in his lab. “I just got jealous of others moving ahead and I wanted to slow them down,” the post-doc said. Editor Brendan Maher, reporting on the case in *Nature* (www.nature.com/news/2010/100929/full/467516a.html; “Sabotage!” *Nature*. Sept 30, 2010. Vol 67, pp. 516-518), stated: “There are few firm numbers showing the prevalence of research sabotage, but conversations with graduate students, post-docs and research-misconduct experts suggest that such misdeeds occur elsewhere, and that most go unreported or unpunished.”

In the United States, according to the article, sabotage cases “aren’t interpreted as fitting the federal definition of research misconduct, which is limited to plagiarism, fabrication and falsification of research data.” However, Maher asserted that they are “an affront to the implicit trust between scientists that is necessary for research endeavours to exist and thrive.”

**Singapore Statement on Research Integrity**

A concise one-page document resulted from the deliberations and discussions of 340 individuals from 51 countries who attended the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity, held in Singapore from July 21 to 24, 2010. “The value and benefits of research are vitally dependent on the integrity of research,” states the Preamble to the document. “While there can be and are national and disciplinary differences in the way research is organized and conducted, there are also principles and professional responsibilities that are fundamental to the integrity of research wherever it is undertaken.”

The Statement sets forth four principles for good research practice: honesty, accountability, professional courtesy and fairness, and good stewardship. In addition, it defines standards in 14 areas of responsibility: integrity, adherence to regulations, research methods, research records, research findings, authorship, publication acknowledgment, peer review, conflict of interest, public communication, reporting irresponsible research practices, responding to irresponsible research practices, research environments, and societal considerations.


**ICMJE Conflict of Interest Reporting Form**

In October 2009, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) introduced the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest, an electronic template designed to be used by authors to report information which could influence how readers perceive their work (see www.icmje.org/). The objective of the standardized form, which ICMJE placed in the public domain, is to remove some of the “variability in the processes that journals use to ask about and report authors’ potential conflicts of interest.” The form was piloted by a number of journals, feedback was incorporated, and an updated version was introduced in July 2010. To aid non-native English speakers, a glossary of terms used in the form was posted on the ICMJE website, and guidelines are being developed for translating the form instructions into other languages. Comments on the current form will be collected until May 1, 2011, and incorporated into the next version of the form.

**Peer review solutions**

An article titled “I Hate Your Paper” published by Jef Akst in *The Scientist* in August 2010 (www.the-scientist.com/templates/trackable/display/article1.jsp?ad_day=1&index=1&year=2010&page=36&month=8&o_url=2010/8/1/36/1/ixzz0wKJhSojX; Volume 24, Issue 8, page 36) presented a range of suggestions from researchers and online readers regarding how to improve the peer review process, which is often perceived as biased and ineffective. Among them:

- Blinding the names of a paper’s authors during review
- Recycling reviews from journals that have rejected the paper
- Requiring reviewers to sign their reviews
- Posting a paper on a website and inviting public peer review
- Inviting reviewers to choose which articles they review
- Allowing authors to decide whether their paper should be re-reviewed
- Publishing first drafts
- Publishing reviewers’ comments along with the paper
- Accepting papers with little potential impact on the field if the science is sound
- Emphasizing that providing prompt, thorough reviews is a service to the community
- Making peer review professional
Playing the publishing game: conflicts of interest in academic publishing

Today an almost unfathomable number of academic journals publish peer-reviewed research in a wide range of disciplines. More than 6000 of these journals belong to COPE. But COPE membership alone doesn’t ensure that journals uphold ethical principles. Conflicts of interest have the potential to influence authors, reviewers, editors, publishers, and organizations that provide funding for research—all of whom are players in the publishing game.

As defined in Conflict of Interest in Medical Research, Education, and Practice, a 440-page report produced in 2009 by the Institute of Medicine (www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12598), conflicts of interest are "circumstances that create a risk that professional judgments or actions regarding a primary interest will be unduly influenced by a secondary interest. . . . Secondary interests include not only financial interests . . . but also other interests, such as the pursuit of professional advancement and recognition and the desire to do favors for friends, family, students, or colleagues."

One practice which has the potential to create conflict for authors is offering monetary awards for publication of research in high-profile journals. Helena Wang, a Beijing-based editor of The Lancet, reports that a Chinese researcher received 600,000 RMB (almost 90,000 USD or 68,000 Euros) from his medical college and hospital for a 2008 Lancet publication, and researchers from the South China Agricultural University who publish in SCI Journals receive 3000 RMB for each impact factor point. "In fact, the amount of money is much higher than the total income of doctors or researchers in a year," Wang said.

New COPE member Manoel Berlinck, Editor of Revista Latinoamericana de Psicopatologia Fundamental, says that Brazilian university professors are under increasing pressure to publish articles in international scientific journals. Although there are no direct financial rewards for publication, “graduate programs with professors and students that publish in international scientific journals receive more scientific and educational support from funding agencies,” he said. As a result, “ethical problems do exist. For example, this evaluation system stimulates dubious co-authorship and the production of articles with dubious scientific standards.”

Selective publication of results is another ethical problem. In online posts responding to the article “I Hate Your Paper” in The Scientist (see From the Field, page 4), a reader named Christopher Baker brought up the issue of investigators who “hoard the negative and trivial results, partly out of pride for their scientific reputations, and partly out of a desire for their competitors to make the same mistakes and not gain an advantage.” Many investigators “learn from the failures of others’ experiments,” he said. “It is depressing, as well as a waste of public research resources, to waste time pursuing an avenue that has been a blind alley for others.”

It’s not just authors who are at risk of acting unethically (continued on page 6)

Case 09-28 “Nominated Reviewer Referral Service”

A rather enterprising example of misconduct by an author was submitted to COPE in 2009 (Case 09-28). The author of a submitted manuscript sent it out for review himself, with the following explanation to the editor: “In some of our previous encounters, you have indicated that finding sufficient cooperative reviewers has been a problem for you. In order to provide you with some help in this area, I have invented an ad hoc entity, ‘Nominated Reviewer Referral Service’, under which aegis ‘blind’ emails were sent to an assortment of academics and journalists, advising them that they had been ‘nominated’ to provide a brief review and evaluation of the paper, which I attached. I did not identify myself as the author or give any kind of a ‘sales pitch’, nor did I try to give the impression that you had anything to do with the sending of these emails, or were even aware of them.” COPE Forum attendees who discussed the case recommended that the editor “Write a firm letter to the author telling him that his behavior is unacceptable.” The author’s actions compromised the review process, and could also have damaged the editor’s relationship with the reviewers, they said. Ultimately, however, despite the unorthodox steps taken by the author, the manuscript was accepted. The editor notified the reviewers that they had not initially been contacted by him, but used their reviews.
due to conflicts of interest. Reviewers also have the potential to delay or sabotage research through the peer review process. This affects not only publications in journals but also decisions on whether to award grants. An anonymous reader of the *Scientist* article commented that “the only recourse to a biased decision on a grant is to resubmit a revised application 6-8 months after the initial submission. This can have a devastating, often irreparable effect on a research program; e.g., loss of key personnel and/or animal colonies, lapses in service contracts that remove equipment from ongoing research, lack of funds to replace essential equipment (i.e., low temp freezer), lack of funds to complete projects that could result in more publications, lost collaborations, etc.”

Journal editors are responsible for ensuring that the review process is fair. And yet many editors, overwhelmed by the number of submissions they receive, never take a close look at the papers they are considering, preferring to rely on the reviewers’ evaluations. Even finding enough reviewers for a balanced critique can be a problem (see Case 09-28 “Nominated Reviewer Referral Service” on page 5).

Publishers of journals, faced with increasing competition, also promote practices which could be considered questionable, such as “suggesting” to authors of accepted articles that they might want to add a few of the journal’s own publications to their reference lists. In order to provide its publishers with some guidance on ethical issues, a COPE committee is currently working on a Code of Conduct for publishers (see page 3).

Finally, organizations that provide funding for research are at risk of violating ethical principles. A questionable relationship with a pharmaceutical company has prompted an investigation into the work of another researcher publishing frequently in COPE member journal *Anesthesia & Analgesia* (see box this page).

According to the Institute of Medicine report, there have been many advances as a result of the collaboration between medicine and industry, but there are also many potential conflicts of interest. The report, in one of its recommendations, “calls on academic medical centers to prohibit faculty, students, residents, and fellows from accepting gifts (including meals), making presentations that are controlled by industry, and claiming authorship for ghostwritten publications.” However, identifying, responding to, and—whenever possible—avoiding conflicts of interest should not be restricted to medicine.

After all, avoiding conflicts of interest is a worthy goal in any discipline.
Guests and ghosts
By Jeannie Wurz

“Do you feel scientifically isolated? Do you find yourself sitting on the side-line while others take the field by the nose and lead it? Are you unable to publish a model that summarizes your data and ideas because reviewers label it as being too speculative and unsupported? Can’t get those experiments published in any regular journal? Do you find that nobody is citing your papers? Haven’t published in your field for some time, but want to show that you are still a player? Well, no need to worry! There is a special category of publication for you, ‘the invited review’.”


As a non-scientist in Switzerland, I wasn’t particularly tempted by the possibility of publishing in an Indian scientific journal. As the COPE newsletter editor, planning a newsletter with the theme “Misconduct”, however, I was curious how TSI might help someone with unpublishable models and noncited research emerge from scientific isolation to “take the field by the nose”.

Following the links to the six journals, I discovered that BioChemistry: An Indian Journal listed the names and addresses of 96 editorial board members, while Macromolecules listed 93. Sixty-one of those board members’ names were the same. Nano Science and Nano Technology, with nine published issues since 2007 but only one editorial board member listed, was inviting “efficient scientists” to submit their CV’s. Physical Chemistry listed a researcher from my university among 68 board members. I searched for him on our website, didn’t find his name, and wrote to a secretary in his department. “In our department we don’t have any David Fermin,” she said.

The fifth TSI journal, Research & Reviews in Electro Chemistry, published 21 articles in 2008, none in 2009, and 7 in 2010. I wondered which of the journal’s 49 board members actually were able to earn their keep by providing reviews.

Or maybe they didn’t earn their keep. Maybe they just applied to be board members to have another line in their CV—Editorial Board Member, Journal X—because they had to have such lines in their CV’s in order to get promoted. I decided to write to the journal editors to ask what, exactly, all these official-sounding editorial board members do.

It was then that I made a rather puzzling discovery. On the Trade Science Inc. website there are journals. There are aims. There are editorial boards. There are tables of contents. There are guidelines. There’s an online submission system. There are volumes and issues and titles and authors and abstracts. There are animated signs that say “Full papers”. But there aren’t any papers. And there don’t seem to be any editors.

I followed the “HELP” link at the top of the screen. An address, fax number and email address appeared. I wrote to the email address, explaining that I was editing a newsletter for the Committee on Publication Ethics with the theme “Misconduct” and would appreciate more information and a comment.

Ten seconds after sending I received a return email: “This is the mail system at hostsmtmp.webfaction.com. I’m sorry to have to inform you that your message could not be delivered to one or more recipients. It’s attached below.”

Thus it seems that ghost authorship may not be the only issues preoccupying COPE in the future. Publishing has evolved to the point where we now have ghost journals and ghost editors.
COPE members discuss plagiarism at 2nd US seminar in Washington

by Geri Pearson

I am a newly elected member of the COPE Council and was able to attend the COPE Forum and seminar on plagiarism held in Washington, DC, on November 29 and 30, 2010. I found both days stimulating, informational, and applicable to my role as an editor. Specifically, I was impressed with the Forum case discussion and the commonality that exists between journals from vastly different academic arenas. The ethical issues, while somewhat influenced by the journal topic and publication structure, are remarkably similar. As always, I’m impressed that ethical issues in publishing require many bright minds to sort out the dilemmas and ultimately, editorial response. The Monday Forum emphasized this process.

The seminar on plagiarism, held all day on Tuesday, included a number of informative speakers. More importantly, it offered generous periods of time for discussion and communication between participants. I got a very positive sense of COPE as an organization and its passionate mission to maintain ethical standards in publishing while offering concrete support to editors and publishers. The networking was invaluable and moved me beyond my North American framework and into an international arena, something I personally strive to attain. I look forward to serving on the Council and am enthusiastic about COPE, its mission, and its leadership.

Attendees at the Forum

Worth a 1000 words

Seeing is no longer believing. Not so long ago, everyone knew that a photo doesn’t lie. Today, image manipulation is not only possible but common. Likewise, the fact that research has been published doesn’t mean that it’s true. Critical evaluation of research is an essential step in the publishing process. Unfortunately, editors of academic journals are devoting increasing amounts of time to investigating misconduct. Providing a platform for COPE members to share their experience and discuss their experiences is what COPE is all about.