

Publishing offensive material

A member journal contacted us recently asking if COPE had any guidelines on publishing what might be considered offensive material. For example, how to deal with expletives or generally unsavoury material.

We discussed at the forum (11 September) whether there is currently appropriate guidance on this issue, including:

- What constitutes bad taste, indecency or obscenity?
- How do you deal with expletives (as part of interviews or transcripts)?
- Where is the line between censorship and freedom of expression?

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (11 SEPTEMBER 2012)

- If the research methodology is sound and the issues are valid, there should be no censorship of the topic of research itself.
- Obscenities or expletives may well be an essential part of qualitative material and should not be blanked out
- But gratuitous obscenities or expletives in for example editorials should be avoided.
- Consider that the content may not be offensive to the audience it is aimed at.
- There are many examples in the English literature of what might be considered indecent or obscene and no one would question that these should be censored.
- Publishers do not seem to have guidance on this issue.
- Publishers should trust their editors to make editorial judgements.

COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE

- Posted on 3/9/2012

How does identify offensive or "unsavoury" material given that beholders read through different eyes? For example, expletives may have an appropriate context in the eyes of some, but not others. Why should we privilege the sensibilities of some to the exclusion of others?

- Posted on 5/9/2012

I think editors have every right to use their own judgment about what is offensive or unsavoury. Occasionally quoting an expletive might be OK - eg, when exposing someone else's use of it - and there will be times when people will be offended by what you publish (eg, homoeopaths being offended by an article that shows homoeopathy's effects to be no better than placebo). But I would say that 99% of the time journals should avoid expletives or anything whose sole intention is to be offensive. There is simply no need for it.