

## Break out session reports

Chair: Anne Cockcroft

Editor, *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*

The various groups reported back on their amendments to the draft guidelines, point by point. Only those issues which provoked extensive discussion are reported here.

### Study design and ethics; data analysis

Facilitated by Professor Michael Farthing and Dr Stephen Evans

Discussion was generated on the ethics of animal research in different countries. A case in point was the example of a British referee suggesting that a paper should not be accepted in a British journal because the way of taking blood from the mouse would not be acceptable in the UK. "We can't really expect people to adopt regulations that are not relevant to their country," commented Michael Farthing.

The analogy was drawn out further by a participant asking if a paper that reported on experiments on people in China, which would not be acceptable in Britain, would be published. "If you would not do that, why should you publish a paper that describes experiment on rats that would not be allowed in Britain?"

It was agreed that the standards adopted for publication should be those currently adopted in the UK. But it was suggested that international journals, which receive papers from Asia and in particular China, would not be able to apply this and may have to publish findings that would not be published had they originated from a United Kingdom base.

"We publish in terms of UK copyright law perfectly happily so why should we behave any differently about UK ethical law?" commented one of the delegates. Another suggested that such a paper on transplantation pointed out the dangers of what happens to people being transplanted under those circumstances—extraordinarily useful in an international community. This would never have surfaced had this ruling been applied.

"You don't want to talk about compliance but what you want to emphasise is that practices which would be patently unacceptable in the host country are the ones you might consider not publishing," said Michael Farthing.

### Authorship; conflicts of interest

Facilitated by Dr Richard Smith

#### *Authorship*

It was felt that most difficulties with regard to authorship could be resolved by disclosure of individual contributions.

The *British Journal of Radiology* asks authors not only to demonstrate their contribution, but actively to identify that contribution, on the basis that the part contributed might be requested, it was noted Anne Cockcroft commented that might be difficult for somebody whose contribution covers a bit of everything.

A fear was expressed that the same people can get away with gift authorship by putting their name to contributing in some vague sort of way, by reviewing the final version of the debate, for example, when they really had nothing to do with it.

Richard Smith suggested that the section on authorship really boils down to "we're confused, so it's all right for you to be too. It's actually a terrible mess at the moment. But the section is a step forward in the sense that if it said 'Terry's contribution was to turn up every so often and tell us a good joke,' it's better than including Terry as one of the authors with the suggestion that he had done as much as everybody else."

"It's one thing for the authors to declare to the editor, but if the paper is published, are they going to give different type size to the different percentage of contributions. How are the readers going to know?" queried another.

#### *Conflicts of interest*

When conflicts of interest are declared to the journal what should the journal then do about it?

Because so many journals are doing such different things, it was felt that it was impossible to be prescriptive about this. If they are declared to the editors, the implication is that the editors can decide.

Should editors publish in their own journals? Yes and no. Editorials only, said some, but they know their subject so well, responded others. A show of hands showed that most present thought it was acceptable.

Comments included:

"I think it's very important that editors, when publishing in their own journal, send it out for a peer review."

"I regularly publish in my own journal. It's totally independently peer reviewed and totally independently decided on. It seems to me that if you do it that way it's OK, and I've had papers rejected."

"My unwritten policy was that the lead editor and the deputy editor would not publish research papers in our own journal. The senior editors and associate journals would be free to do so. I think the issue of the editor in chief excusing himself from the editorial review process is not a cut and dry issue, because there is a question of the bias of whoever you sign over the decision of the process to. There is still a question of

them being favourably biased towards accepting a paper because their editor in chief is the author of that paper. It requires a lot more debate.”

“I think there is no reason why an editor shouldn’t publish in their own journal but it obviously shouldn’t be processed by him/her.”

“If you do it, I think you should declare at the end of the article the process you used to review it, and not leave it to the readers to assume that you used an entirely fair process.”

“I think the same argument should apply to the editorial board. It’s very unfair to penalise the board just because they may be working on what you consider the best journal.”

“If you have a decent editorial board you hope you have some of the best brains in the specialty. To exclude them from the journal seems a bit like shooting yourself in the foot.”

“I refereed something for an editor in his own journal, and along with the other reviewer, recommended rejection. The editor published it, and so I replicated it, or failed to replicate it in a study four times as large. He refused to publish my paper.”

## Peer review

Facilitated by Dr Sandy Goldbeck-Wood

Journals could declare whether or not they propose to grade reviewers, and if they do, to tell them. It may not be acceptable to keep information on people that you’re not willing to reveal to them.

It was noted that the Data Protection Act is shortly to be extended to written documentation beyond the present conditions of the 1984 and 1987 Acts for access to computer records. There may not be any choice or flexibility. Someone may ask to see the name of confidential referees held on written records in editorial offices.

It was felt that there were exemptions within the body of the Act which would preclude serious problems *vis à vis* authors wanting to know who had refereed their paper, and for information on that referee.

*Brain Research Bulletin* sends anonymised papers for review: “We’ve done that regularly for the past five years and I don’t think it changes the outcome of the peer review process one iota. It does increase the confidence of some less self confident authors, by getting a fair review that they may not have otherwise. So I think it’s more of a perception to authors of fairness rather than any change in the fairness.”

Comments included:

“I don’t think it’s made any difference to the fairness of the review process except that it enables reviewers to show off and say it’s obvious that this comes from so and so, because they are the only people doing this work, etc., so we are paying lip service. It’s helpful but not essential.”

“There was one small randomised controlled trial published in *JAMA* which suggested that blinding the

reviewers to the identity of the authors improved the quality of the review. We then did two much bigger randomised controls trials, one of which we did at the *BMJ* and one of which was a multi journal trial in the US, and neither of them found any benefit whatsoever in the quality of the review. The outcome measure was a validated measure of the quality of the review.”

“The quality is slightly dependent on how long you take to review. A very short time to do it and a very long time means poor quality, and the optimum is between that—about 3 weeks or so.” Other experience indicated that 3 to 4 weeks gave reviewers time to read it once and then go away and think a bout it and come back a do a more careful review.

A show of hands indicated that the delegates were more or less equally divided on the issue of whether open peer review was a good idea.

## Redundant publication; plagiarism

Facilitated by Dr Philip Fulford

### *Redundant publication*

It was felt that it is justifiable to publish in other languages because not everyone speaks English. Similarly, important research published in languages other than English needs to be widely disseminated.

How disclosure should be made also provoked considerable discussion. Disclosure form at revision stage? If authors were to sign this, the onus of truth rests with them. If they do not comply, they would be guilty of a deliberate attempt to deceive, and would make it clearer to interpret their behaviour as ‘with intent’, and to then institute action.

It was agreed that reviewers/referees couldn’t always be relied on to spot problems.

There are legal copyright obligations to seek permission to use or reprint text/figures, but these are hard to enforce.

### *Plagiarism*

Caution is required for plagiarism referring only to published work because rejected papers have been plagiarised. People also plagiarise grant applications that are not published material.

“If you announce your ideas and discuss them in public, they’re in the public domain and you can’t patent them.”

“Surely it’s a moral issue rather than a legal one. If I had a brilliant idea here and announced it to all and sundry which someone else claimed as their own, surely that’s a moral argument?”

“This is important issue because we’re all used to discussing with colleagues from institutions, different ideas and so on.”

“What tends to happens at conferences is that people will only present either an accepted version or what has already been published, and so very frequent-

ly at conferences you get a 'proceedings of' which consists of stuff which is entirely dual publication. They are not usually in *Index Medicus* but they are cited by *Current Contents*, for example, and they just appear and appear. I think it probably ought to be stopped."

What about the web? The *New England Journal of Medicine's* line is that if an abstract at a meeting has been posted on the web or published on a CD in relation to the meeting then that will not constitute primary publication. It was suggested that even if something has been published in full on the web it will be increasingly difficult for journals to say they won't publish it.

## Duties of an editor; media relations

Facilitated by Dr Richard Horton

### *Duties of an editor*

Even if something happened in a journal years ago, the editor would still have a responsibility in terms of making it public, it was suggested.

"Editors will always have opinions about topics and they can therefore influence the review process unofficially. They can write to reviewers saying 'am I making a terrible mistake if I publish this paper, or I'm planning to reject this paper, so do you think I'm making a terrible mistake?' and you're expected to review along those lines. That surely should not be happening."

There was no resolution to the problem of what happens to the editor of a small journal if he is being questioned for a possible allegation of misconduct? There may be nobody else in a proper position to do that.

Privileged information also came under discussion. Should editors who have access to that, publish it? If of merit and relevance, why not, but what about the publication of articles that are relevant to materials that might be being prepared for biological warfare?

Who should editors confess to?

- Consortia or COPE, using the orange card system advocated earlier.
- Relevant publisher
- Learned Society
- COPE could widen its remit to deal with complaints against editors
- If editors sign up to COPE, they agree to abide by its rulings.
- An ombudsman, a readers' watchdog, such as is operated by *The Lancet*.

### *Media relations*

It is not just authors who need to give a balanced account but journals as well, because the larger ones have media relations staff who proactively put out press releases and hold press conferences.

When authors reach out to the media they have a certain obligation to work with the journal and the editor on how they are communicating to the media; similarly, the journals that want to proactively communicate with the media need to keep authors informed of what they are doing.

It was felt that it is sometimes difficult not to supply journalists with additional data when they want to know what has happened one year on, and that sometimes additional data have to be supplied to clarify the science.