

A view from the Royal College of Physicians

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Genesis of action

That is a need for action, and a feeling of discomfiture in the academic community, and certainly in medical schools, that not enough is being done to ensure that all research coming out of medical schools is valid and of value.

There is no definition of fraud and misconduct which covers the whole spectrum of activity. Misconduct is perhaps the best all embracing term to use for activity which ranges from plagiarism through to deliberate deception for personal gain, involving fabrication or the production of fraudulent data.

Need for action

- Definition of “fraud and misconduct” not widely known
- Not all medical schools have clear procedures
- No guidelines for doctors in NHS

A survey was undertaken by Councils of Heads of Medical Schools of the 25 medical schools in the UK. Eighteen responses were received; only 10 of them had written procedures which could be followed in the event of an allegation of fraud or misconduct in research.

The committee chaired by Professor George Alberti, President of the Royal College of Physicians, for the GMC, could not just focus only on medical schools and universities because this problem can involve those working outside universities and medical schools, and specifically those who work in the NHS. The stakeholders in ensuring that research is of high quality, is not fraudulent, and not produced in any way which might have derived from misconduct, comprise a wide ranging group. The ensuing report from Professor Alberti’s group will therefore attempt to try to define the range of misconduct, from the relatively trivial through to deliberate deception for personal gain.

Elements of good practice

In all institutions which undertake research, there should be a manual of good practice which ensures that both supervisors and those people who are going to be involved in research know what is expected of them, and what the relationships are between supervisor and supervised, and among different researchers in a research group.

The supervisor has a key role, and manuals of good research practice can offer guidance to both those who are supervising and those who are going to be supervised: there should be induction courses for researchers. Having established a graduate school in science, engineering, and medicine in Manchester, generic courses for all those undertaking research in that graduate school are available, so that a culture of scientific integrity is promoted. Undergraduates need to be exposed, right from the start, to principles of good research practice, to prevent the slide down the slippery slope which can end in deliberate deception.

Good research practice includes:

- access to raw data
- availability of statistical analysis/advice
- fostering a culture of scientific integrity
- eliminating the practice of gift authorship

Action

- In response to allegations, all organisations where research is undertaken should publish legally valid guidelines for dealing with allegations of fraud and misconduct.
- Organisations should review the contracts of all employees, to ensure that procedures are binding, whatever the source of funding or the location of the research.
- Those involved in screening and investigating allegations should be appropriately trained.
- Investigations should include representation from outside the institution where the alleged misconduct has taken place.
- Investigations should involve a two-stage inquiry, beginning with an internal enquiry, and then a formal enquiry involving outside experts.
- A time limit should be set for the initiation and completion of the process.
- An appeals process should be in place that is independent of the screening and formal inquiry stages.
- Most organisations have limited experience of, and expertise in, dealing with allegations of fraud and misconduct in research and its consequences for those involved, so there should be a national body or panel of experts to whom organisations can apply for advice and guidance.
- Once an allegation has been proved, action should be taken by:
 - the appropriate professional body
 - grant awarding body
 - relevant journal editor
 - possible revocation of a degree/fellowship
 - disciplinary proceedings

- A central register of incidents involving deliberate deception in research for personal gain of any kind should be maintained, covering all research institutions, and funded by the participating bodies.
- The data on the register should be accessible, with appropriate safeguards, to named officers in the institutions where the research is undertaken.
- Data on the proposed register should be available to professional authorities, such as the GMC.