



COPE seminar 2005 - March 11
Black Room, BMA House, Tavistock Square, London 9.30 – 16.30

Programme

- 9.30 Registration
- 10.00 Welcome
- 10.05 COPE Code of Conduct for Editors – Results of Code Survey - Fiona Godlee
- 10.20 Small group discussion of example cases of editor misconduct
- 10.50 Group feedback and plenary
- 11.15 *Tea Break*
- 11.30 Panel for Research Integrity - John Pritchard
- 12.00 COPE website – Dominic Mitchell - new search capabilities
- 12.30 Iona Heath – The ethics of audit and research

Lunch 1.15 - COPE AGM

- 2.00 Common ethical and editorial dilemmas of author misconduct – how should you respond? – Sabine Kleinert and Jeremy Theobal
- 2.10 Liz Wager - Practicalities of investigating suspected misconduct
- 2.15 Small group discussions – Common editorial dilemmas
- 3.15 *Tea Break*
- 3.30 Group discussion & plenary

4.30 Summary and Close

Please note that the proceedings of the seminar will be recorded and in some cases reported verbatim in COPE's annual report. By attending the seminar you are agreeing that any feedback you give will be recorded and may appear in print.

COPE conference cases

1. A reviewer informs you that he considers a submitted intervention trial from the UK was unethical. This is because a possible, albeit rare, side-effect could be anaphylaxis. Given the risk, he does not believe participants would have agreed to the treatment, so concludes that fully informed consent had not been obtained. You know that the senior author had unfortunately died so make enquiries of the new corresponding author, who was his registrar when the study was undertaken. He supplies a letter showing that his late senior had sought ethical approval and that numerous concerns were expressed by committee members, who asked for further information. However, after an informal lunch meeting between the senior researcher and the ethics committee chairman, the latter took personal action to dispense with the need for approval.
2. You receive an anonymous note telling you that a paper recently submitted to your journal contains falsified data and that other researchers in the field had long been suspicious of the author concerned. The paper has already been favourably reviewed and neither the clinical nor statistical reviewer had cast doubt on its probity.
3. A short report from a developing country describes treatment of 3 patients with lymphoma, using a herbal extract, not contained in medicines formularies. None had received currently recommended cytotoxic therapy. The author claims a successful outcome in 2 of the patients. It is a single-author paper by a private practitioner who does not give an institutional address.
4. A reviewer, who happens to be an associate editor of another journal, tells you that a paper you sent her to review has also been submitted to her journal. Both covering letters stated the paper had not been submitted elsewhere. Moreover, the reviewer points out that a MEDLINE research shows 2 references cited in the paper to other work by the author, which she considers were also duplicate publications. When you write to the author, he apologises for the error, which he states, resulted from a misunderstanding between his co-authors. He wishes to withdraw the paper from consideration. The other editor has, meanwhile, rejected the paper sent to him.
5. A correspondent informs you that a significant part of the discussion section in a commissioned paper you sent to her for review was a near verbatim copy of her own work, previously published in a related, but low-impact, small circulation journal. There was no attribution in the references. When asked for an explanation, the senior author offers profuse apologies and points out that the research fellow responsible for that section of the review has a poor command of the English language and may have found it very hard to summarise the previous discussion. He is sorry that the remainder of the group did not notice the alleged plagiarism, that it was not intentional and that he would rewrite the discussion section. Moreover he would make it clear to the research fellow how he should behave in future.

6. You accept a paper but ask for some revisions, which you consider relatively minor. The new version takes a long time to arrive and, when it does so, the named authors have fallen from 4 to 2. The corresponding author explains that his co-authors were unable to agree on the changes. You contact one of the 'disappeared' authors and are suspicious that she has been 'leaned on' by her head of department, a senior official in the government's health department. It appears he is concerned that the conclusions are overstated and may result in patients stopping a safe and necessary drug, if (as is likely because of the topicality of the subject) the lay media quote the conclusions without a clear description of the difference between causation and association.

She, and her head of department, reject your offer that they should write an accompanying commentary. Having re-read the paper you are sympathetic to the government department opinion and agree there is a chance that any ensuing publicity might mislead patients. However, the 2 remaining authors refuse to change their conclusions, adding that your last letter to them stated you would accept the revision if they took into account the reviewers' comments - which they have done in full.

7. You have accepted a paper which uses a case report of a rare adverse incident to highlight the author's belief that a widely practised form of therapy is non-evidenced based, illogical and potentially dangerous. The author had asked for it to be fast-tracked because of the need to protect patients in future and you have agreed to this request.

Just as the proof copy arrives pre-publication, the author telephones your technical editor. He explains that he is appearing as an expert witness on behalf of a claimant seeking recompense from an NHS Trust for alleged clinical negligence in treating her in the manner outlined. He would like to know when the paper will be published as he wishes to use it when giving evidence. The tech. ed. did not ask whether the case report is of this claimant, the claimant with demographic details altered to preserve confidentiality or another case altogether.

8. A junior researcher writes to you indicating that you published a paper without her name appearing as an author, even though she had contributed more than 50% of the cases reported. She tells you that the first author 'stole my data and published it without my knowledge.' You write to the named authors, who are in another country, but receive no reply - even to a reminder letter.