



Forum agenda

**Meeting to be held on Monday 3 June 2013 at 3pm
The Council Chamber, The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH),
5-11 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SH**

1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair

2. Forum discussion topic: Authorship, contributorship, who's doing what, and what do we need? <http://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-authorship-contributorship-whose-doing-what-and-what-do-we-need>

3. New cases

- 13-05 Editor as author of a paper (PB)**
- 13-06 Ethical obligation to find reviewers (ACG)**
- 13-07 New claim to authorship of published paper (BD)**
- 13-08 Unusual frequent submission of articles by a single author (FJ)**
- 13-09 Retraction update? (CK)**
- 13-10 Authorship dispute (ET)**

4. Updates

- 12-29 Fraudulent data presented in a manuscript**
- 13-02 Change in author's name after publication**
- 13-03 Ethical concerns and the validity of documentation supplied by the authors**
- 13-04 Findings of a published trial called into question by a subsequent audit of trial conduct**

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2. Forum discussion topic: Authorship, contributorship, who's doing what, and what do we need?

(<http://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-authorship-contributorship-whose-doing-what-and-what-do-we-need>)

Background

Authorship issues are one of the most common issues that COPE members have to deal with. Leaving aside the ethically problematic issues of ghost, guest and gift authorship, seemingly simpler authorship disputes of for example, who deserves authorship, or what author order should be are very common across most disciplines.

There a number of authorship guidelines, including those from the [ICMJE](#), but even journals that use these guidelines encounter problems with understanding of the issues and compliance from authors. COPE has [flowcharts](#), which can at least help with handling issues once they arise.

However, it is now not clear whether authorship guidelines reflect current research practices, let alone future needs, and there is increasing discussion whether contributorship or some other method should be used instead.

Questions for discussion

- How frequently do you see authorship disputes at your journal—and if so, of what type?
- Does your discipline have specific authorship guidelines?
- Have you considered using contributorship criteria instead?
- Could COPE usefully provide further guidance in this area?

3. NEW CASES

13-05 Editor as author of a paper (PB)

A subject editor, who oversaw a manuscript, was invited by the authors to become a co-author after the first review round. After inviting the subject editor to become an author (and adding his name to the author list), the revised version of the paper was submitted to the journal. The authors expected that a different subject editor would handle the paper in the next review round.

However, when the revised version was submitted, no one (including the subject editor himself) noticed the addition of the subject editor's name to the revised paper, and the subject editor took "automatic" care of the revised manuscript when it was assigned to him by the editor-in-chief, who also had not noticed the addition of the subject editor's name to the paper.

The second revision was directly accepted by the editor-in-chief. During proof corrections, no one noticed that the subject editor was listed as an author and also as the communicating editor (it is standard practice on the journal to name the subject editor on the published paper—ie, "Communicated by ...").

Thus the article was published online before the authors became aware of the problem and contacted the editor. The editor-in-chief believes the subject editor was acting in good faith, but is very concerned about the situation and the breakdown of the journal process. The manuscript managed to slip through two rounds of the journal's editorial process.

The authors are also very concerned about this awkward situation, which looks like preferential treatment, and have asked the journal what can be done to avoid this impression.

Question

What can the journal do?

13-06 Ethical obligation to find reviewers (ACG)

An associate editor handling a paper for this journal reported to the editor-in-chief that he had not yet been able to recruit a single reviewer—all those who have been contacted had declined or not responded. The paper is in scope for the journal, it seems of reasonably quality from a brief read and the associate editor is appropriate; but this is a small and specialised field, and finding expert and unconflicted reviewers is proving challenging (not helped by the paper length and the sophistication of the paper).

We are persevering but if we cannot recruit reviewers soon we intend to write to the authors telling them of the situation and asking whether they want to withdraw the paper.

Questions

- (1) If they do not want to withdraw the paper, are we ethically obliged to keep trying to find reviewers?
- (2) Or do our editorial responsibilities only extend to making 'reasonable attempts' to find reviewers?

13-07 New claim to authorship of published paper (BD)

In October 2011, our journal received a submission from author A with co-authors B, C and D. After review and revision it was published in mid-2012. In April 2013 we received a complaint from author X, saying that the work published in this paper was his work, and that although author A had been his research supervisor at the time the work was done, authors B, C and D had either little or no input to the work. Author X said that the correct authorship should be X and A in that order.

Author X provided as evidence an internal document submitted to and accepted by the university authorities in May 2010 in fulfilment of a requirement to demonstrate capability for research. His academic record confirms that this submission was successful. He then changed supervisor (and department) within the same university due to a breakdown of relations with his previous supervisor, and proceeded to complete his PhD in January 2013.

The internal document is not in English, but it is apparent that close to 75% of the content of the journal paper has effectively been taken from the internal document. [This has been checked roughly through the use of online translation. The majority of figures and diagrams are clearly the same. The authors (A–D) of the published journal paper do not appear to be contesting that this document was the source of the text although they claim ownership of the data and ideas.]

When challenged, author A says that author X was a poor researcher and was away from the country for considerable periods of time when he should have been doing the work. He also suggests that others in his research team gave author X considerable help with the internal document. He claims that author X has fraudulently used the work of author A and his co-workers, both in the internal document and in his PhD thesis.

The editor's suggestion was that author X's name should be added to the authors of the published paper, as second author (compromising on the initial request of author X that he should be first author, given that author A was the team leader, had a strong interest in the work and that this complaint had come nearly 3 years after author X had departed the group, amid some acrimony). This would be achieved through the publication of a corrigendum. Author A disagreed strongly, and said that he did not wish his name to be on the same paper as author X's. Author A also encouraged the other co-authors to respond, and they supported him. The original authors said they would rather withdraw the paper than have author X's name added.

The editor indicated that withdrawal (retraction) of the paper was not an option at this stage, as no one had questioned the science in the paper, and the concern was solely over the authorship. The editor also pointed out that the guidelines on authorship, available through the journal's web page, made clear that anyone who has made a significant contribution to the article should be included in the list of authors. The prior existence and acceptance by the university of the internal document as proof of the research competence of author X would appear to be sufficient proof of a significant contribution. This would not apply if there had been some formal challenge within the university, but no challenge appears to have been made.

The current head of department of author A has largely confirmed the picture painted. He says that when author X first came to the department he was announced by author A to be a 'brilliant student', but that relations started to break down early on, as author X had expected

to do research in a somewhat different area. He confirms that after the internal document had been submitted and accepted, author X moved to complete his PhD in a different department, although in the same general area as before. He agrees with the proposed action and says he will attempt to convince author A, but with no feedback as yet.

Questions

- (1) Can the journal make a decision to add author X's name without the agreement of the other authors? Given the opinions that authors A, etc, have so forcefully stated, this seems inappropriate.
- (2) Could a corrigendum be used to demonstrate the full order of suggestions—that author X be added, that authors A, B, C and D said that if that were decided they would withdraw their names, and therefore the paper would now be acknowledged as the work of author X alone?
- (3) Should the request of author A and others that the paper be retracted be accepted? This appears entirely inappropriate as no one is objecting to the science or claiming that the work should not be published on scientific grounds?

13-08 Unusually frequent submission of articles by a single author (FJ)

A sixth year medical student, with expected year of graduation of 2013 (Mr X), submitted 29 original articles and 17 letters to the editor in the period February 2012 to October 2012 to our journal. This amounted to an average of five submissions per month. Mr X is an author and corresponding author in every article. Of these, he is the first author of eight original research articles and 12 letters. In the remaining one he is a co-author. The articles are on very diverse subjects.

This set us thinking that, apart from his clinical work and studies, how he had time to conduct research, analyse the results and write the articles.

The journal first wrote to Mr X for the necessary justification. He responded promptly, "I am one of the best researchers of my country and have multiple publications in every field of medicine and have won multiple prizes". He provided a list of 72 publications to his credit. He also provided the name and email of the chief of the research committee of the university.

We wrote to the concerned parties asking them to endorse the submissions as being ethical and valid for the purpose of publication. The chief replied that Mr X was a member of the student research committee with some research background in medicine which led to multiple awards and publications. He confirmed the research background in a vague manner and there were no more comments or endorsements of the submitted articles.

We then wrote to the vice chancellor of the university asking for verification and endorsement of the articles according to the ICMJE guidelines. The director of research affairs was also approached, who asked for details of all the articles submitted. These were duly sent.

In the meantime, Mr X contacted us stating that his e-mail had been hacked and someone else had sent letters and articles with his name. This was incorrect, as all mails had the same e-mail address. We also sent an email to the Publication Commission in our country on 6 March 2013. There has been no response.

We face a dilemma. The articles are lying unprocessed. It is a mystery as to why the higher authorities are not taking any action or replying to our emails.

Question

- (1) What would the COPE Forum suggest we do?

13-09 Retraction update? (CK)

I'm seeking advice on how my journal should publish an update to an author requested retraction. In a past issue, our editorial team accepted an author requested retraction; the authors cited errors in data reported in various figures. We have since learned of other errors in the paper and its figures, and we would like to now publish an update that provides more detailed and specific information than that provided in the original retraction.

Questions

- (1) What form should this update take to ensure that it is properly indexed and recognized?
- (2) Should it be published as an 'update', as a 'corrigendum' or as a new version of the retraction?

13-10 Authorship dispute (ET)

A manuscript was published in journal X, submitted by several co-authors, including one of the editors in chief of journal X, Dr A (the article was handled by another editor in chief at the journal). Another researcher, Dr B, has claimed that this article should be withdrawn because it contains unauthorized data from him (Dr B).

A few years previously, Drs A and B worked and published jointly, but at some point there appeared to be a divergence in points of view on the interpretation of results (obtained in a large part by Dr B and his team) in a manuscript co-written by both Drs A and B (and the teams of both Drs A and B). Dr A decided that Dr B and his team must agree to the publication of the manuscript or they would be removed from the co-author list. The paper was then submitted as an appendix in an internal report for their funding agency.

Later, a similar paper was published by Dr A and his team (only) with similar content to the previous disputed paper in journal X. Dr B and his team are acknowledged in the text but have not been asked or listed as co-authors. The paper contains the results from Dr B's team, very important results, that people now refer to as from Dr A's team.

Dr B thinks this is a violation of the rules of good scientific practice and has asked advice from a third independent party. The third party recognized the violation of the rules of good scientific practice and suggested publishing an erratum. Dr B refuses to agree to an erratum because his team do not necessarily wish to be co-authors, as they disagree with the interpretation. Dr B wishes to have this published article withdrawn.

Question

What should the editor of journal X do?

4. UPDATES

12-29 Fraudulent data presented in a manuscript

Anonymised text of the case:

Author A submitted a trial comparing the safety and feasibility of two delivery techniques in patients. The trial, which was done at author A's institution, was assessed by inhouse editors, who decided to send it out for peer review.

During the peer review process, some reviewers pointed out that "this work seems premature, experimental and hard to believe", and also expressed suspicion about the result (ie, 100% procedure success rate). One of the peer reviewers, reviewer X, who works with author A at the same institute in Europe, and who was also acknowledged in the author's submission, provided further comment. In his letter to editor, he stated that "I have reviewed some of their manuscripts more than 10 times, and I have refused to be associated with their research, because I had no access to the raw data on which there is an embargo made by the military authority in this country." He continued that "it is fair to say that the data are unbelievable, without a negative or positive connotation. If the data exist and are correct, they will deserve a Nobel Prize.....as a matter of fact, a fake document has been circulated and the hoax has been disclosed in a very elegant way by a young colleague".

After discussion among editors at our journal, we decided to reject the manuscript and ask for an investigation by the author's institute. However, since the European institute already seems to be aware of the likely fraudulent nature of these results, and we cannot find contact details for anyone at the institution, we would welcome your advice on to whom we might best direct the investigation.

Advice:

The Forum cautioned that it is much more difficult to deal with authors and resolve an issue when you have rejected the paper, as the journal no longer has any say over the paper. It is much easier to obtain information from the authors before you reject the article. However, all agreed that this case should be pursued and the editor needs to give the authors an opportunity to respond to the accusations.

The advice was to give the authors one more chance to reply. The editor should contact all of the authors (not just the corresponding author) and inform them that because of the issues raised in peer review unless he hears back from them by a specified date, he will assume that the reviewer comments are correct and will then contact the author's institution. The Forum advised contacting the institution if the authors fail to respond or if they respond in an unsatisfactory way. The European institute may be able to provide contact details for the initial institution. Also, the editor could ask the reviewer who works with author A at the same institute in Europe to provide contact details for the author's present or previous institution. The Forum advised addressing the institution in a non-judgemental way, simply informing them of the facts of the case and asking them to investigate.

Update:

The editor continued to contact the institute about this matter, but there has been no response since February. The editor now feels there is little else he can do and considers the case closed.

13-02 Change in author's name after publication

Anonymised text of the case:

An original work was published in our journal in September 2010. The article had five authors. Now, in February 2013, the third author is requesting an alteration in his/her name. The original name published was SFHS. The request is to change the name to SFH, both on the journal's website and Medline.

No valid reason could be provided by the author for this change in name. The last name is the cast and now he/she wants to write in future without the cast being evident.

Would this deletion be ethical?

Can there be any legal implications?

Advice:

The COPE Forum was divided on whether or not the editor should allow the author to change their name. One view was that there are many reasons why an author might want to change their name (marriage, divorce, for example) so the editor should publish a corrigendum, provided the editor receives proof of the identity of the author. An author should be allowed to have charge of their name, and if they wish to change it, then the editor should accommodate this request by publishing a simple erratum or corrigendum. This would be linked electronically to the publication and would be picked up by Medline automatically. The online version of the paper could also be changed, depending on the policy of the journal. It is not unethical to request a change in your name but the editor must be certain that the author requesting the change is in fact the author of the paper, and the editor should insist on proof of identification.

However, another view was that the name was correct in 2010 when the paper was published, so is an erratum really appropriate? The spelling of the name, for example, is correct. If the author's request is a vanity issue, then the majority of the Forum suggested not changing the name. Hence it is then up to the journal and publisher whether they feel they want to spend the time and effort correcting the name. Unless the author has very valid reasons (which he has not provided to date), then the majority view was that the editor should do nothing.

The Forum noted that this case highlights the importance of schemes like ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor ID, <https://orcid.org/>), which provides a code to uniquely identify academic authors and which authors can sign up to. Then an author's history and online activity can be traced, regardless of what name they use, as all publications are traced back to this unique identifier.

On a show of hands, the majority (15) of the Forum said they would not change the name and 10 said they would.

Update:

As no valid or convincing reason could be provided by the author for a change in name, we wrote back stating that the case had been discussed at the COPE Forum and the majority of the Forum were of the opinion that, due to lack of a convincing reason, the name should not be changed. The case is now considered closed.

13-03 Ethical concerns and the validity of documentation supplied by the authors

Anonymised text of the case:

We became concerned that not all of the co-authors were aware of a research paper submitted to our journal due to the difficulty receiving responses from the email addresses that had been supplied and their nature, given that the authors all worked in a hospital/academic institution. Despite repeated requests and attempts we remained dissatisfied with the responses and did not feel certain that all of the authors were aware of the paper. We therefore requested further documentation signed by all of the authors, but all of the signatures appeared to be signed by the same person, and hand writing analysis suggested this was highly likely. In addition, the statement from the ethics committee also had a similar signature. The letter from the 'head' of the ethics committee was on blank paper, not letterhead, and was not received as an original hard copy.

We therefore contacted the head of the ethics review committee who was different to the head on the document we had received and about which we had some concerns. The current head eventually confirmed after a second request that the doctor who had signed the previously supplied document was not on the committee. Ethics committee clearance has since been granted retrospectively after the paper was submitted.

As a result we have significant concerns about this paper, its ethical clearance and some of the documentation that has been supplied. We have advised the authors that we have suspended processing of their paper and that we would seek further advice from COPE. Our intention is to report our concerns to the hospital director and formally reject this paper.

We would appreciate guidance on any further action we should take.

Advice:

The Forum agreed with the proposed course of action of the editor. It would not be appropriate in this case to simply reject the paper. It is very clear that something serious has happened in relation to the governance of this paper, and if the editor were to simply reject it, it is quite likely that the authors will simply submit elsewhere. In these situations, COPE recommends that if an editor has a concern about a paper, even if they end up rejecting it, they must tell the authors that they will take it further and that it is highly likely that it will be referred to their institution for further investigation.

(COPE Council also discussed this case outside of the Forum). Council members agreed with the proposed course of action. This appears to be a very serious breach of ethics and the author may repeat this type of misconduct with another journal.

First you should inform all the authors of what you are going to do in a factual, non-accusatory way.

As there may be legal implications, you should also ensure that the letter to the hospital director has to be purely factual, with dates and copies of letters between the journal and the ethics service and the authors. Claims about forged signatures need to be backed up by a report of handwriting analysis (or if you can't supply that you should not make the accusation directly). The journal should consider taking legal advice.

You may want to pursue this issue further to a higher institutional level. Hence, in addition to the hospital director, if there is another head of the academic institution or some kind of oversight office then you might consider contacting them also. If the authors are working in an academy (university) and the hospital is affiliated to that university, then there may be a research regulatory body of that university that could be informed.

Update:

The journal followed the advice given by COPE and sought legal advice from their publishers before writing to the hospital director raising their concerns. The editor also rejected the paper and gave the authors the reasons for doing this. The editor has had no response and so he plans to write again and also write directly to the head of the ethics committee.

13-04 Findings of a published trial called into question by a subsequent audit of trial conduct

Anonymised text of the case:

In 2008, our published a phase 2 randomised controlled trial of a new medicine. In 2011, the regulatory authority in the country where the study was performed decided to undertake routine monitoring of completed studies and this trial was selected for random inspection. The author informed the journal of the inspection and provided a translation of the report (independently verified as accurate by our journal).

The following concerns were raised by the regulatory authorities:

- (1) There was no medical involvement in the process for informed consent, which was delegated to a non-medical practitioner. The country's regulations require that a medical practitioner informs a participant and confirms this. The local ethics committee has been informed by the regulator about this lapse.
- (2) The integrity of blinding was questioned in an earlier inspection in 2007 and because of comments about the treatment's efficacy and side effects by one of the investigators while the trial was underway.
- (3) The recording and assessment of adverse events was incomplete and the inspectors felt that the table of adverse events published in our journal did not reflect the clinical records for product safety.

The manuscript had two rounds of peer-review (seven reviews by four clinicians and a statistician). The only point of relevance to the above concerns was the comment that "the main weakness of the study is inadequate data on safety and adverse effects (in part unsurprising as this was a proof of efficacy study) and a rather overly positive presentation of the data". The manuscript was revised and re-reviewed by this reviewer and a statistician; both were satisfied that the points had been addressed in the revision. After publication of the research article, our journal published two letters as correspondence. In one, the possibility of certain adverse events was raised, to which the authors replied that these had not been observed.

The authors have submitted a correction that states incorrect instructions by the contract research organisation resulted in under-reporting of adverse events for headache, migraine, stress and depression in people who had experienced these conditions before enrolling in the trial. They also state that comments about the medicine made to local media were based on another study. The editors are concerned that taken in their totality, the issues raised by the regulator question the soundness of our publication. As we gather more information and await the ethics committee's decision about the process for informed consent, the editors would be interested in learning what actions COPE would recommend.

Advice:

The Forum advised that if the editor cannot decide what to do, a statement of concern could be published in the interim. If the editor thinks the methodology was insufficient (to detect side effects), then he should consider retracting the paper. Clearly a correction needs to be done. The expression of concern should mention the fact that the table of side effects may not be correct, in addition to the issue relating to consent. The editor told the Forum that he does not believe there has been any misconduct and the authors wrote the paper in good faith. On a show of hands, nine people suggested that the editor should do an expression of concern detailing the chain of events. Only two people thought the paper should be retracted. Hence the consensus was that it would be appropriate to put a statement of concern on the paper.

Update:

The journal has received a letter from the author that responds to the expression of concern and the inspection report. At present, the precise wording is being negotiated with the author.