What to do if you suspect fabricated data

(b) Suspected fabricated data in a published article

Reader expresses suspicion of fabricated data

Thank reader and state your plans to investigate

Consider getting a 2nd opinion from another reviewer

Assemble evidence of fabrication

Contact author to explain your concerns
Request raw data/lab notebooks as appropriate

Author replies

No response

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)

Author replies

No response

Contact author’s institution requesting your concern is passed to author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance, if necessary coordinating with co-authors’ institutions

Author(s) guilty of fabrication

Inform all authors you intend to contact institution/regulatory body

Contact author’s institution requesting an investigation

Author(s) found not guilty

Publish retraction

Apologise to author(s)

Inform reader of outcome

If raw data are supplied these should be assessed by a suitably qualified person, ideally in cooperation with the author’s institution

Satisfactory explanation

Apologise to author
Publish correction if necessary (e.g. if an honest error has been detected)
Inform reader of outcome

Unsatisfactory answer/admits guilt

Contact regulatory body (e.g. GMC for UK doctors) requesting an enquiry

No or unsatisfactory response

Inform all authors you intend to contact institution/regulatory body

Apologise to author(s)

Inform reader of outcome

(e.g. if an honest error has been detected)