



Forum agenda

**Meeting to be held on Tuesday 4 December 2012 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: Citation manipulation

<http://publicationethics.org/survey/forum-discussion-topic-citation-manipulation>

3. New cases

- 12-23 How to correct a published paper (JH)**
- 12-24 Plagiarism of a PhD thesis (TW)**
- 12-25 Plagiarism in a book title (TW)**
- 12-26 Reprimanded author plagiarizes again (IT)**
- 12-27 Submitted paper already published elsewhere (IT)**
- 12-28 Serial plagiarism by an experienced author (NR)**
- 12-29 Fraudulent data presented in a manuscript (LG)**
- 12-30 Retraction of the first article in the case of a duplicate publication (TR)**
- 12-31 Concerns about the reliability of findings following re-analysis of a dataset from a published article (SB)**
- 12-32 Confidentiality breach by an associate editor (AvS)**
- 12-33 Inadequate assurance of human research ethics for a questionnaire (BF)**
- 12-34 Journal refuses to correct the record (KO)**

4. Updates

- 12-13 Unethical private practice**
- 12-16 Compromised peer review (unpublished)**
- 12-17 Anonymity versus author transparency**

CONTENTS

2. Forum discussion topic: Citation manipulation	3
3. NEW CASES.....	5
12-23 How to correct a published paper (JH)	5
12-24 Plagiarism of a PhD thesis (TW).....	6
12-25 Plagiarism in a book title (TW).....	7
12-26 Reprimanded author plagiarizes again (IT).....	8
12-27 Submitted paper already published elsewhere (IT)	9
12-28 Serial plagiarism by an experienced author (NR)	10
12-29 Fraudulent data presented in a manuscript (LG).....	12
12-30 Retraction of the first article in the case of duplicate publication (TR).....	13
12-31 Concerns about the reliability of findings following re-analysis of a dataset from a published article (SB).....	14
12-32 Confidentiality breach by an associate editor (AvS).....	15
12-33 Inadequate assurance of human research ethics for a questionnaire (BF).....	16
12-34 Journal refuses to correct the record (KO)	17
4. UPDATES	18
12-10 More than a breach of confidentiality?	18
12-13 Unethical private practice.....	19
12-16 Compromised peer review (unpublished).....	20
12-17 Anonymity versus author transparency	21

2. Forum discussion topic: Citation manipulation

<http://publicationethics.org/survey/forum-discussion-topic-citation-manipulation>

The issue of self citation has been discussed in a number of places before. The summary below was drafted by Dr Richard Irwin, with input from Ginny Barbour, COPE Chair. This brief commentary is intended to focus attention on a form of citation manipulation that qualifies as coercion, where an editor or others affiliated with a journal pressure an author to add citations from that journal for the implied purpose of increasing citation rates and, by extension, journal impact factor.

This excessive self-citation by a journal, whereby articles are found to contain references that do not contribute to the scholarly content of the article and have been included solely for the purpose of increasing citations, misrepresents the importance of the specific work and journal in which it appears and is thus a form of scientific misconduct. When practiced by editors, with the compliance of senior investigators, it not only contaminates the literature but also sends a message to younger investigators that unethical behavior is acceptable. The Council of Science Editors addresses this concern in discussing “Editor Roles and Responsibilities” in their white paper on integrity in scientific journals,¹ deeming the practice of citation manipulation unacceptable.

Thomson Reuters has taken steps to address the problem of unwarranted self-citation, including suspending journals that repeatedly self-site at a level deemed to be excessive from inclusion in their annual Journal Citation Reports. Thomson has also developed the EigenfactorTM Score, which is an impact factor-like calculation that takes the additional action of removing self-citations entirely. While these measures are beneficial, citations remain the key metric throughout the scientific and academic culture: researchers and academics who place research in high impact journals, as measured by impact factor specifically, are rewarded with promotion, growing their careers and giving them access to conduct larger studies; journals with a high impact factor may attract higher quality research.

The temptation to game citations remains strong, yet we lack criteria to identify uniformly when excessive self-citation has occurred, as well as a mechanism to address it when identified. Editors who engage in this practice are putting their reviewers and authors at risk of scientific misconduct. In addition to the statements made by the Council of Science Editors and the actions taken by Thomson Reuters, additional accountability is needed at the editor and publisher level to further discourage and curb this unethical practice.

1. Council of Science Editors. CSE's White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications, 2012 Update. Wheat Ridge, Co: Council of Science Editors; March 30, 2012.

Questions for discussion

- Should citation coercion be reportable to a higher authority and who should that authority be?
- How can we create additional disincentives for journals to participate in citation coercion? For example, should COPE consider publishing a list of journals and editors reported to engage in excessive self-citation?
- Should COPE identify criteria that would trigger review of a paper that has excessive citations to one journal?

- In the event that articles are found to contain excessive self-citation as the result of coercion, would COPE recommend the article reference list be revised and an erratum published? What action might be required of the offending journal?
- Should journals be encouraged to publish a policy statement on citation manipulation practices?
- Should programs of editor education be encouraged to add the issue of citation manipulation and author coercion?
- Should editors consider using other metrics rather than just citations (for example some journals are now collecting and publishing downloads and social media activity on papers).

3. NEW CASES

12-23 How to correct a published paper (JH)

A paper was published in July 2012. The author was told by their institution that one of the figures had to be replaced, in the interests of national security. Failure to do this would result in imprisonment. The editor checked with one of his reviewers who said that replacing the figure will not affect the results or conclusions of the paper.

So, can we replace the published version directly in order to avoid further dissemination of this figure or should we republish this paper? Or should we withdraw the paper? Is it possible to block the paper to avoid further dissemination and then republish this paper with the new figure?

12-24 Plagiarism of a PhD thesis (TW)

We received a complaint from an author claiming that her PhD thesis had been plagiarized in a journal article. After many discussions, the editorial office decided that the authors should resolve this issue among themselves, as it was an author dispute.

After further correspondence, the editorial office is now also saying that because the thesis is not published anywhere, there is no need to cite it in the reference list. The instructions for authors state that: "The list of references should only include works that are cited in the text and that have been published or accepted for publication. Personal communications and unpublished works should only be mentioned in the text."

There are many opinions/views/cases available on different websites. But the prevailing view seems to be that any document, whether an unofficial discussion piece (or an unpublished thesis?), must be cited. What is the opinion of the COPE Forum?

12-25 Plagiarism in a book title (TW)

We received a complaint of plagiarism by Dr A concerning a book that has just been published. This case is ongoing since January 2012.

Authors B and C published a new, very extended edition (+1000 pages), on a topic that previously was covered in part in an English book by author B (published in 2006). Part of this book was based on a German book published back in 1993 by Dr A and author B. The English book was taken off the market by the publisher because of alleged "plagiarism" by author B. The publisher apologized to author B for this withdrawal which seemed to have been a mistake (but there is no written documentation on this). Copyright of this book was transferred to author B. Dr A has made a complaint of plagiarism for this book too. Copyright of the German book was transferred to both authors (Dr A and author B). It is therefore unclear what exactly has been plagiarized (in the 2006 book and the revised edition).

As the publisher, we sought two independent reviews. Unfortunately, the publisher asked the authors to come up with the names of the "independent" reviews, so we are a little hesitant to rely on both reviews. However, the reviews are respected scientists, and both state that "similarity is inevitable because of the involvement from the same author (author B) and overlap in the topic treated. It is also clear that the book is not based on new material, but it brings together existing material in a presentable form, but has a different formulation form and interpretation of material".

Authors B and C mention that they have included all appropriate quotes/references to the previous book. Dr A has received parts of the text for review, and the authors have been willing from the start to rewrite anything that comes close to the original text of Dr A, should there be any similarity.

The lawyer, hired by author B, informed all parties, based on both reviews, that this is not a case of plagiarism. Dr A in the meantime has also hired a lawyer because he is not in agreement. So far we have not heard anything from this lawyer. Dr A now requests a statement from publisher on the case.

We believe there are strong personal issues at work here. With books, there is no editor-in-chief that can investigate the case or make a decision with help of his editorial board/associate editors or other body in the form of a society.

At the moment we, as the publisher, will make the new book (of over 1000 pages) available to Dr A so that he can indicate which sections show overlap with the 1993 German book (published by him and author B) and probably the 2006 English book.

Is there any advice from the Forum on this complex case?

12-26 Reprimanded author plagiarizes again (IT)

A reviewer, R1, brought to our attention several suspected cases of plagiarism in paper A1, submitted by authors A.

The main concerns were:

- large parts of paper A1 resembled paper B submitted by a different group of authors B, with one of the most major changes being a change in the observation day;
- large parts of a section were taken from paper C by author C, including an entire figure;
- other sentences were copied from other papers.

The paper was rejected with no further repercussions for authors A. Authors A then resubmitted the manuscript to our journal a year later. We had since become more aware of pursuing cases of suspected plagiarism and asked for a statement before submission to peer review. Authors A answered in great detail, providing lots of information, apologizing profoundly and promised to take the utmost care that this would never happen again. We discussed this case and decided to proceed with peer review, treating this as a once only mistake and noticed that all of the criticized sections and more had been removed and/or rewritten.

Paper A2 was then reviewed by reviewer R2, who found new cases of plagiarism, different from the first. Again, the corresponding author A, when asked to comment, apologized profusely.

We are unsure how to treat this, as the sections copied are not too extensive. However, given the author's history, we feel the need to issue a ban or possibly notify the institute? Does the Forum agree?

12-27 Submitted paper already published elsewhere (IT)

Authors A submitted paper A to our journal in April 2012. One of the reviewers pointed out that a very similar paper, paper B, had already been published in another journal based in the authors' home country and covering a different field, in August 2012. Indeed, the title is almost the same, except for a few words switched around.

We asked the authors to comment on this and were told that the database and analysis were different, with the main difference being data collected along the coast versus data collected inland. The data and analysis are indeed slightly different, but in our opinion not enough to be treated as two separate publications. Also, we asked why the authors did not cite paper B in paper A.

They answered that because they did not receive a review for paper A for 4 months, they submitted paper B somewhere else with a slightly different scope. This paper was seemingly immediately published online by the end of the month and printed in October 2012. The authors stated that they had no chance to cite paper B in paper A, and were not apologetic in the least. Instead, they chose to blame our turnaround time.

Paper A has been rejected, but we are unsure of how to deal with these authors in the future.

12-28 Serial plagiarism by an experienced author (NR)

Suspicions were raised on 20 September 2012 by a reviewer who commented that some of the passages in a submission from Dr J were similar to an earlier paper published in our journal by the same author. An iThenticate check indicated a similarity index of 60%; however, the overlap was not from that earlier paper but from another source by a different author which had contributed 41% of the material.

This prompted an iThenticate check of the published paper, which gave a similarity index of 57%, with 45% of the material from three papers by other authors. (It should be noted that this paper was reviewed and accepted before iThenticate was available for checking incoming submissions.)

It was clear that the new submission should be rejected. The key issue was the action to be taken about the paper that had already been published.

The editor of the journal in which two of the key sources had been published kindly provided copies and the published paper was checked by hand against these two earlier papers. This check established that the iThenticate report was reasonably accurate. It appeared that one of the plagiarized papers had been used as a means to improve the quality of the English while the other had provided a framework for the reporting of the statistical results: Dr J had substituted new figures in the running text of the earlier paper.

COPE guidelines were followed and a carefully worded letter was sent asking Dr J for an explanation. In summary, his reply said that: (a) he was building on the work of the earlier authors, (b) he did not understand or mean to do it and (c) he was very sorry and would not do it again.

Dr J had made six other submissions to our journal, all of which had been rejected on the grounds of quality. iThenticate checks on these revealed similarity indexes between 66% and 77%. Typically up to three sources had been plagiarized to contribute up to 63% of the material. A search using Google Scholar identified that Dr J had published over 20 other papers in different journals since 2005.

In the light of this information, Dr J's explanation of naivety was considered to be implausible and the decision was taken to retract the published paper. Dr J was given a final opportunity to respond and gave the same explanation for the overlap. The retraction will be published in the next issue of our journal and on the journal website. In view of the extent of the plagiarism, the decision was also taken to inform the president of his institution.

There remains the question of whether the editors of the other journals in which Dr J has published work should also be informed of this case.

The editor would welcome the comments of the Forum on this issue.

Following this incident, the journal has reviewed its policy to detect and discourage plagiarism in submitted work.

- As a matter of routine, the journal now checks all of the work submitted for publication using iThenticate.

- Submissions that appear to include a significant amount of previously published material are investigated further to establish whether that material has been referenced and attributed appropriately.
- Where the overlap is found to exceed an acceptable level, we write to the author(s) providing a link to the full report and inviting them to withdraw the submission, or alternatively to revise it extensively to reduce the overlap and to indicate where they are quoting the work of others (or their own previously published work). We also ask for their comments on the overlap.
- If the author cannot provide an acceptable explanation or where the overlap is very significant, then we will immediately reject the submission.
- The issue of plagiarism is being included in the Journal Reviewer Development Programme to heighten awareness of the problem within the Reviewer Panel.
- We are seeking to engage in discussions and the exchange of information on plagiarism with editors of other journals in the field.

We have also retrospectively checked the overlap of all submissions currently in process and identified several others with unacceptably high similarity indexes. We are asking those authors to withdraw their submissions or to revise them to eliminate the overlap.

Of the 231 submissions that have been checked to date, 71% have an iThenticate similarity index of less than 30%. Over 12% have a similarity index in excess of 40%—the level at which iThenticate gives a plagiarism alert. Excluding the eight submissions from Dr J, there were 9% falling into this category. The remaining 16% fall in the range 30–39% and have been investigated. In all of these cases, the overlap was in acceptable quotations and in the bibliography and no further action has been taken. The, as yet unanswered, question is whether these figures are typical for an international journal.

12-29 Fraudulent data presented in a manuscript (LG)

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.

12-30 Retraction of the first article in the case of duplicate publication (TR)

Earlier this year it came to our attention that a published article in our journal (journal A) had also been published in another journal (journal B). The article in journal A was published later than the article in journal B, so following COPE guidelines on duplicate publication, we contacted the authors for an explanation. Their response was to blame the editor of journal B for publishing the article without their agreement. From the date of submission to journal B and date of publication in journal A, we knew that the manuscript was under consideration in both journals simultaneously. We were therefore not satisfied with the authors' response and, as we had the later publication, we proceeded to contact the authors, informing them that we intended to retract their article. In response to this, the authors informed us that the article in journal B had now been retracted, and that they had received an apology from the editor. We have looked into this, and the article in journal B does indeed appear to have been retracted. The retraction notice does not give a reason for the retraction, other than that it was retracted at the request of the authors. Journal B is not a member of COPE.

Regardless of the reason for the duplicate publication, or how it came about, we felt that as we had published second, the onus was on us to retract the article. We are concerned that the authors have chosen which published article to keep in the public domain and have avoided a retraction notice mentioning the duplicate publication. As there is no longer a duplicate publication, there appears to be little we can do. We plan on contacting the authors' institution, and journal B (to inform them of why retractions are usually published), but we are unsure whether there is any other action we could take and would be grateful for any suggestions.

12-31 Concerns about the reliability of findings following re-analysis of a dataset from a published article (SB)

Following publication of an article, a reader posted a comment raising some questions about the data analysis in the study and the availability of the dataset. We followed-up with the authors and they offered to share the dataset with the reader—the dataset involves genetic information from potentially identifiable patients and as a result the authors indicated that the deposition of the data was not possible due to patient privacy concerns. After several months the reader indicated that he had not received the dataset from the authors and that he had discussed the study with a member of the editorial board who shared the concerns about the reliability of the results reported. We further followed-up with the authors to reiterate the request for the dataset and they made the dataset available to the editors and the reader.

The reader has re-analyzed the datasets provided by the authors and he indicates that his results do not support the conclusions reported in the article. The re-analysis has been evaluated by the editorial board member who previously commented on the article and he agreed that the reliability of the findings in the article is compromised by the results of the re-analysis. We asked the authors to provide a response to the results of the re-analysis and we indicated that, in the light of the concerns raised, it may be necessary to consider retraction of the article. The authors have replied and offered to collaborate with the reader in further analyses, however they suggest that the differences in the results may be due to the different methodologies employed for the analyses and they have not formally agreed to retract the article.

We have offered the reader to submit his re-analysis for publication but he is not interested in doing this; he is however willing for us to make his re-analysis publicly available via a public notification on the published article if we decide that such a notification is necessary.

In the light of the concerns raised about the study, should we post a formal public notification on the article in order to alert readers of the concerns about the validity of the findings? If so, would it be appropriate to proceed with a retraction or given that the authors have not agreed to this, consider instead the publication of an expression of concern?

12-32 Confidentiality breach by an associate editor (AvS)

The authors of a manuscript sent an official complaint to our journal regarding a breach of confidentiality by an associate editor (AE). The authors had been informed by the supervisor of a reviewer of a manuscript. After submission of the review, the reviewer received a confidential email from AE asking whether the favourable recommendation made by the reviewer would have been different if the reviewer had been aware that the group submitting the manuscript had been recently queried by two journals on ethical issues. The reviewer (junior member of a research group) did not respond to the email of AE but informed her supervisor. The supervisor informed the authors and the authors filed a formal complaint.

The journal acknowledged receipt of the complaint and requested details and evidence of the accusations against AE. The editor received an email from the supervisor of the reviewer confirming the facts, as well as an edited copy of the email send by AE to the reviewer. We informed AE of the complaint and our investigation of the allegation concerning a follow-up email send by AE to one of the reviewers of the manuscript informing them of the past history of the author group.

We asked AE for comments and an explanation, and told him that manuscripts will not be assigned until a resolution has been reached.

The reply from AE contained apologies for the "wrong behaviour" and a plea to be able to continue his work as AE. At no point was the resignation of AE offered to the journal. The editor and editorial team (deputy editors and managing editor) have considered all aspects and have come to the conclusion that collaboration with AE should be stopped.

Has the COPE Forum any additional comments? Have similar cases been submitted?

12-33 Inadequate assurance of human research ethics for a questionnaire (BF)

A questionnaire was distributed to knowledge workers in an organisation to investigate the following hypotheses:

- H1. There is a positive and significant relationship between ethics and organizational performance.
- H2. There is a positive and significant relationship between ethics and intellectual capital.
- H3. There is a positive and significant relationship between intellectual capital and organizational performance.

Partly due to the very high rate of response (148/160), consecutive queries were made to the authors about the procedures for subject consent.

Our most recent (and direct) query was: "What we need to know more about is what was done to protect the interests of the individuals who were surveyed. Was there any inducement for them to take part (for example, a reward, or a punishment for not doing so)? Did you collect any consent forms from those individuals? What did they say (please supply a translation as an additional document)? Were any reassurances made to them, or is there a possibility that giving an answer that managers, the government or religious authorities don't like could result in harm for the individual? If there are possibilities of harm were the 160 individuals surveyed warned about them? How? Were they told what the data would be used for? What were they told? When you have amended the paper to give some indication and can supply a (translated) consent form, please visit the instructions to authors to complete your submission".

In response to these queries the following reply was received. "We have set a cover letter in the first part of questionnaire which included the following items: the questionnaire was developed without any name and individual information. As discussed before during the learning programs within the organization, strong attention and commitment to ethical issues are important to reach organizational objectives. Considering the importance of both ethics and IC, the ultimate goal of this study is to explore the relationship between them, and finally their impact on organizational performance. The result of this research will be published by considering privacy issues. It is important to note that the organization's management has a strong commitment to the above noted subjects. Besides a non-valuable reward, the most important incentive for employees' participation is that they are in this believed that their organization should be pioneer in comparison with their competitors. Due to being knowledge-based organization, employees have actively participated in such studies, and also they have perceived their positive outcome well, accordingly involving in such studies was accepted as a common subject in that organization".

It thus appears that no consent forms were collected and nothing was said about possible harm to participants. There is no assurance that they were able to answer freely.

Given the wider context of the research, do human research ethics constitute a barrier to publication of this paper?

12-34 Journal refuses to correct the record (KO)

An author contacted our journal in August 2011 informing us that a paper he had published in our journal in 2005 had been published, word for word, in another journal (journal X), under a different title and author group, in 2007.

We followed the appropriate COPE flowchart and contacted the editor of journal X. The editor of journal X told us in September 2011 that he would publish a retraction and a letter submitted from the author group admitting a "disagreeable mistake".

Journal X publishes infrequently, so I checked over the past 12 months for the retraction and published letter. The notice and letter were never published and the article is still available through the journal's website and SCOPUS. I contacted the editor of journal X in October 2012 to ask him if he planned to retract the article and publish the letter, as we had agreed. He replied that the article was no longer available. I sent him the link where I was able to retrieve it and he did not reply back.

The original author of the paper contacted the author group's institution in September 2011, but he never received a response.

In the COPE flowchart for suspected plagiarism, the journal that published the plagiarized article issues a retraction; however, what should be done if that journal will not correct the record? Journal X is not a member of COPE.

4. UPDATES

12-10 More than a breach of confidentiality?

Anonymised text of the case:

A journal received two manuscripts on the same topic in short succession. Manuscript A was rejected after peer review; manuscript B, submitted a few months later, was accepted after peer review. When manuscript B was published, author X contacted the journal to express concern about similarities between both papers and the fact that the first had been rejected and the second accepted. The journal investigated and found that one of the reviewers of manuscript A worked in the same laboratory with one of the authors of manuscript B.

The journal was further notified that manuscript A, while under peer review, had been discussed in a journal club at reviewer P's and author Y's laboratory. Both author Y and reviewer P, when confronted with these allegations, admitted the incident and apologised but said it had been a lapse with no ill intent.

The journal's editor-in-chief informed author Y and reviewer P that their behaviour was considered a serious breach of confidence and that they would be removed from the journal's list of peer reviewers. The editor-in-chief also considered informing the institution but decided against it at this point in time.

The journal also decided to review its process for monitoring peer reviewers' competing interests and to educate their editorial board about the need for confidentiality.

Should the journal have informed the institution and asked for further investigation?

Advice:

The Forum noted that it is very difficult to sort out what has been happening in this case and so advised contacting the authors' and reviewers' institutions. There are three institutions involved and the Forum suggested informing the institutions of the details of the case so that they are aware of the situation. Discussion of papers in journal clubs, while perhaps not uncommon, is not acceptable behaviour. The Forum also advised the journal to review their journal policy on reviewers, making it clear that they should declare any conflicts of interest.

The editor informed the Forum that two further papers had been submitted to the journal. The reviewer has submitted a paper and asked that the authors of paper A be excluded from reviewing it, and the authors of paper B have submitted a second paper, including the reviewer of paper A. The Forum advised that editors should take into consideration authors' requests but the editor cannot always comply with the authors' wishes to exclude the use of a particular reviewer. The Forum advised making a decision on whether to accept or reject the two new papers based on their scientific merit.

Update:

The journal followed the advice of the Forum, and a letter was written to the institution of author Y and reviewer P, advising them of the breach of confidentiality. The letter was acknowledged by the institution and an apology made. The author and reviewer have now

been barred from reviewing from the journal for a period of 3 years. Submissions from the parties involved will be judged on scientific merit.

The journal also reviewed its policies and further reinforced its wording to reviewers to declare any conflict of interest before accepting an invitation to review a manuscript.

The policy of the journal to honour any reasonable request by an author to exclude a reviewer will be continued, while noting any unusual or unreasonable requests, and investigating them accordingly.

The journal thanks the Forum for the advice offered which has helped with the resolution of the problem.

12-13 Unethical private practice

Anonymised text of the case:

This single author manuscript describes the treatment of 300 women with psychological problems. The women were randomised to either therapy or pharmacological intervention, and this study reports the relative effectiveness of these strategies.

At submission, the manuscript did not contain any mention of ethics approval, consent or trial registration. When the author was queried on these issues, he claimed that the study was performed ethically, but that he did not have ethical approval because he did the study privately, and is not associated with any organization or institution. Since he had listed his affiliation with university X, we questioned how he had access to these patients. The author responded that he runs a private practice, and that he wanted to mention university X out of “personal interest”, and to please remove the name of the institution from his submission.

This author does not have a Scopus or PubMed record, or an institutional email address. Upon searching for his email address in Google, we identified two papers that appear to have been published by this author in journal A and journal B, neither of which is indexed in Scopus or PubMed.

We have contacted university X through their general email address to alert them of this individual, since he appears to be using their name in an unauthorized context, but have not received a response. We contacted the author to express our concerns and inform him that we would keep his file open until the issue has been resolved, but received no response. We attempted to contact the author’s medical council to report this individual, but were unable to find contact information as their website is not in English. We also contacted journal A and journal B to notify them of our concerns, in the event that they also wished to investigate this author; neither journal has responded.

Two months later, we re-sent the notification to university X general email address and received an out of office response.

We would greatly appreciate any suggestions on whether there is anything further we can do other than to reject the manuscript.

Advice:

The Forum suggested that the editor has a duty to pursue this further and to continue to try and make contact with the author and the institution. Suggestions were to send an email to a specific person or department at the institution, not just use the general institution email; find out the name of the vice-chancellor or head of the department; locate a phone number or email contact for the secretariat in charge of the department; find someone to translate the information on the website. The university needs to know that their name is being used in this context by this author, and they need to start an investigation. The Forum also advised contacting journals A and B again. Are there any co-authors on the other papers? If so, the editor should try to contact them. Does the journal have any editorial board members in this country who could tell the editor the relevant person to contact?

If the editor still gets no response, another suggestion was for him to write an editorial on this issue.

Update:

Based on advice from the COPE forum, we have again attempted to contact the institution through their general email address—we have still not been successful in identifying a personal contact at the institution. Our next step will be to find someone to help us translate the website or an editorial board member who may be able to help us identify a committee or other point of contact in the author's region.

12-16 Compromised peer review (unpublished)

Anonymised text of the case:

A manuscript was flagged to editor X as having received reviewers' reports indicating very high interest. At that point the manuscript had been through one round of review, revision and re-review, and all three reviewers were advising that the manuscript be accepted without further revision.

On checking the credentials of the three reviewers, editor X was unable to find the publication record of any of them. All three reviewers were found to have been suggested by the authors. Institutions were given for the suggested authors but the supplied email addresses were all with webmail services. The reviewers were found not to exist.

Associate editor Y had invited the author suggested reviewers and two of their own choosing, neither of whom had replied to the invitation.

After it was determined that the reviewer suggestions were faked, a previous publication by the same authors with the same 'fake' reviewers was identified.

Following the recommendations of COPE regarding a recent similar case discussed at the COPE Forum (case number 12-12), all of the authors were contacted to ask if they could supply more details of the suggested reviewers, but they have not responded. We have attempted to find a contact at the authors' institution. It has proved difficult to identify a research ethics committee, any individual senior member of the university or contacts for the university administration. During other searches, a vice principal of the university was identified but was found to be the senior author on both manuscripts.

We are now seeking guidance on the best course of action with regard to both the unpublished and published manuscripts, in the absence of any response from the authors and no reliable contacts at the authors' institution. Our current intention is to reject the manuscript under review and issue a retraction of the published article.

Advice:

The Forum agreed that this case was brought about by the failure of journal processes and their peer review system. Good practice is always to check the names, addresses and email contacts of reviewers, and especially those that are recommended by authors. Editors should never use only the preferred reviewer. While the Forum recognise that finding reviewers can be difficult and that the peer review system can be hard, simple checks can avoid a similar situation in the future. The Forum agreed that the publisher should take some responsibility as it is their duty to support their editors. The editorial office clearly needs guidance and step by step procedures.

Then there is the issue of the author trying to defraud the system. The advice was to continue to try and contact the author and the author's institution, and inform them of the situation, explaining the author's inappropriate and possibly criminal behaviour. The author should be told that that if no response is received, then the previous paper will be retracted. Other advice was to consider re-reviewing the published article.

It was also suggested that the editor might consider writing an editorial on this issue.

The case was also discussed at the North American Forum (18 October 2012). Additional advice was to require an institutional email address in addition to a webmail address for any suggested reviewers and for editors to send correspondence to both addresses. Another suggestion was to verify the webmail address with an IP address route trace, which the participant suggested was relatively simple and could be performed by anyone if there were no IT department to assist with the task

Update:

With regard to the specific manuscripts in this case, the one that was under review has been rejected with a warning to the authors that the activity was unacceptable. For the published manuscript, we have had discussions with the editor concerned but the final resolution of the case is still in progress. We have received no response from the authors and no success in finding contacts in their institution, although we are pursuing another avenue to try and identify one.

More generally we have had some broad discussions in the company about preventing future cases. There are some short-term fixes in progress and more comprehensive plans for technical additions to our systems that should help prevent these and other forms of author misconduct that will come about in the new year.

12-17 Anonymity versus author transparency

Anonymised text of the case:

An editor invited an author to submit a paper to his journal. Colleagues of the author suggested "unsubmission" because it could be damaging to the author's career. The editor contacted the publisher and requested that the paper be withdrawn. The editor then contacted

the author asking if he would consider publishing the paper anonymously (ie, with no identifying names). The editor did not consult with the publisher on this matter.

The publisher has placed the paper on hold, seeking guidance on author transparency. Publishing anonymously is typically not permitted by the publisher because of concerns about author transparency and because the publisher believes that they should publish in the highest ethical regard. There are no patient confidentiality or privacy issues associated with this case.

The publisher would like the Forum's view on the balance between anonymity and author transparency. Should there be a set policy in place?

Advice:

The Forum noted that this was an unusual case, and that the only examples of papers published anonymously that they were aware of were in a situation where an author is at risk of physical danger or is in fear for his/her life if his/her name were to be published or associated with specific criticism.

The Forum agreed this was an editorial decision and that it is up to the editor to weigh up the issues and decide on balance whether or not to publish anonymously. The Forum warned that the editor needs to be certain that the author is genuine and his concerns are valid, since if the claims are later found to be untrue, this could damage the credibility of the editor and the journal. Is the editor comfortable publishing anonymously solely because of possible damage to the author's career? Is the editor confident that he is knowledgeable in this specific discipline that he can make an editorial judgement? Is he confident that the claims will not be subject to any legal disputes? The editor has a duty to ensure that he has taken appropriate steps to ensure that what he publishes is correct.

Update:

After discussion, the publisher was willing to publish the anonymous article under these exceptional circumstances, but the publisher would not support this in the future without a risk assessment of each case. The editor agreed and understood that if the transparency policy of the journal is called into question, the editor will stand by, prepare to explain and defend what has been the editor's decision.