



## **Forum agenda**

**Meeting to be held on Tuesday 4 March 2014, 3–5pm (GMT)  
BY WEBINAR**

### **1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair**

### **2. Forum discussion topic: Issues related to papers submitted to “discussion” journals (<http://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-dois-papers-submitted-discussion-journals>)**

### **3. New cases**

- 14-01 Potential fabrication of data in primary studies included in a meta-analysis accepted for publication (KK)**
- 14-02 Coauthor fails to respond to request to confirm coauthorship (AL)**
- 14-03 Image manipulation as a general practice (BH)**

### **4. Updates**

- 13-03 Ethical concerns and the validity of documentation supplied by the authors**
- 13-08 Unusually frequent submission of articles by a single author**
- 13-09 Retraction update?**
- 13-18 Claim of plagiarism in published article**

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## **2. Forum discussion topic: Issues related to papers submitted to “discussion” journals (<http://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-dois-papers-submitted-discussion-journals>)**

### **Background**

Authors in any subject area have always had a number of potential publications to choose from when they decide that they want to publish their research. As well as subscription journals to pick from, the increasing number of Open Access models has meant that the choices for authors are expanding all the time.

A new type of publication that has arisen from the OA movement is the European Geosciences Union (EGU) and Copernicus model of open peer review and Discussion journals, examples of which are: Hydrology and Earth System Sciences: Discussions and Hydrology and Earth System Sciences Earth Surface Dynamics: Discussions and Earth Surface Dynamics

### **How does this model work?**

1. The author submits their paper to the discussion section of the journal
2. Within 2-8 weeks, the paper is up online with a DOI, ready for the open peer review process
3. Two referees are invited to post their reviews online
4. Anyone else can comment on the paper whilst it is going through review
5. A decision is made on the paper based on the review comments, with the normal “major,” “minor,” “accept” and “reject” decisions available to the editors
6. If a paper receives a “minor” or “major” decision, the authors make their changes offline and submits their new version to the discussion section for the next round of reviews
7. If a paper is accepted, it moves into the “proper” version of the journal, with a link to the original discussion version
8. If a paper is rejected, it remains online with the DOI and reviewer comments in the discussion section of the journal

**This Forum discussion document concerns this model of peer review and publication, but primarily the consequences of the decision of “reject” on papers. Please leave your comments on the website: <http://publicationethics.org/forum-discussion-topic-dois-papers-submitted-discussion-journals>**

### **Papers rejected from the discussion section of an EGU journal**

On the website for these discussion journals, the wording with regards to submission of rejected papers to other journals implies that they can use their rejected paper from the discussion section and submit it elsewhere (please see below). However, we as publishers, along with a number of our editors, have serious concerns about this, not least the fact that the discussion journals’ publisher should not be dictating submission policies for other publications. The main reasons for concern are:

- Should editors agree to review a paper that is already “published”?
- Would this count as dual publication if the paper was accepted to another journal?
- There appears to be a low rejection rate for these types of journals, causing concern about the quality of research.

- What will be the effect of open peer review on early career researchers? (pressures to publish more and more, bad reviews that remain online indefinitely etc).
- What are the APC charges and when are they paid?

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### **KEY QUESTIONS FOR THE FORUM:**

**What happens if a manuscript that has been published as a discussion paper in XXXD is not accepted for publication as a final paper in XXX? Can the manuscript be withdrawn from XXXD and published elsewhere? Are there any issues with how papers with an earlier version published in XXXD are cited once the “definitive” paper is subsequently published?**

As outlined on the journal homepage, discussion papers published in XXXD remain permanently archived, citable, and publicly accessible. Normally, they cannot be withdrawn after publication. This approach has been chosen for a number of practical and conceptual reasons, and it has proven to be beneficial for scientific communication and quality assurance as explained above and in more detail elsewhere. Nevertheless, we are aware that the publication of a paper in XXXD and subsequent non-acceptance into XXX can be inconvenient for authors. In such cases, the authors have the following options to proceed:

#### **• OPTION A**

Appeal to the XXX executive committee for review and revision of the editorial decision. In this case, the executive committee will carefully review the decision of the co-editor who has originally handled the manuscript. This process will normally involve the original or additional referees and an iteration of manuscript review and revision. An appeal is recommended only if the authors are firmly convinced that the editorial decision not to accept the paper for XXX was clearly erroneous, and that their manuscript clearly meets all evaluation criteria for acceptance into XXX.

#### **• OPTION B**

Submission of rewritten manuscript for review, discussion, and publication in XXXD and XXX. If the editor and/or authors of a manuscript published and discussed in XXXD conclude that the manuscript can and should be re-written in a way which goes beyond regular revisions (e.g. addition of substantial new results, etc.), a rewritten manuscript can at any time be submitted for independent review, discussion, and publication in XXXD and XXX.

#### **• OPTION C**

Submission of the manuscript to an alternative journal. In many scientific journals pre-publication in a scientific discussion forum (like XXXD) is considered equivalent to pre-publication on a scientific pre-print server (like arXiv.org ) and is not regarded as a reason for exclusion from (re-)submission for fully peer-reviewed publication. We expect that in the long run most if not all scientific journals will adopt this policy. Normally, even very good manuscripts can be further improved by revision. In the unlikely event that a very good manuscript cannot achieve publication in XXX, a revised and further improved version is very likely to achieve publication in an alternative journal.

### 3. NEW CASES

#### **14-01 Potential fabrication of data in primary studies included in a meta-analysis accepted for publication (KK)**

Journal A has accepted a meta-analysis for publication. As is standard practice for many articles accepted in this journal, a key expert (Professor X) in the relevant field was invited to submit a commentary on the paper. Professor X expressed concerns to the journal that “we believe that some of the papers included in the review could be either fabricated or at best are heavily plagiarised”. The papers included in the meta-analysis are all primary studies published in peer-reviewed journals.

Journal A requested some evidence for the concerns raised by Professor X.

Professor X has already tried to investigate the potential research misconduct of the primary studies. He sent a comparison of five studies, three of which were included in the meta-analysis accepted by journal A. Professor X claims strong evidence of plagiarism, and questions whether the trials took place at all. He also notes that he has previously written to the authors of the trials but says that few have responded. Those that did respond, he believes, have failed to provide reassuring responses.

Example response from authors sent to Professor X include the following: “The work has been actually undertaken after proper clearance. And details of the same are available with the competent authority.” “We don't want to be get disturbed as I discussed with our main author.” “Excuse us..Bye”.

Journal A has now halted publication of the meta-analysis.

The editors of journal A are unsure how to proceed, as the potential research misconduct lies with research not submitted to the journal, but rather primary studies included as part of a meta-analysis submitted based on the “available data”.

#### **Question(s) for the COPE Forum**

- (1) How do we establish whether or not the primary studies are fabricated?
- (2) Is it journal A's responsibility to pursue this investigation or should it be the responsibility of the journals in which the primary studies are published?
- (3) How should journal A proceed with managing the meta-analysis accepted for publication?

### **14-02 Coauthor fails to respond to request to confirm coauthorship (AL)**

Prior to publication, our journal requires coauthors to respond to an email to confirm their authorship status and the author list. A coauthor did not respond to these emails, and when we contacted the corresponding author for help, s/he told us that his/her attempts to reach the coauthor have failed, and that s/he believed the coauthor was attempting to hold the paper hostage.

According to the corresponding author, the coauthor was fired from their institution (which is in a different country than the journal) for ethical lapses, and was now extremely upset and was suing the institution. The corresponding author believed that the coauthor was deliberately ignoring the confirmation requests in order to punish the corresponding author.

Although in general we believe that authors have to resolve their own authorship disputes (involving the institution if need be), we felt this case was different because it did not appear to be a case of disputing who should/should not be an author, or a situation in which a coauthor objected to some aspect of the paper. Instead, if the corresponding author is to be believed, it is simply a disruptive manoeuvre that twists the journal's ethics safeguards (intended to prevent ghost/honorary authorship) into a weapon.

We decided that it was reasonable for the journal to expect a coauthor to perform the straightforward task of confirming coauthorship, and that if that individual did not do so (for reasons of malice or not), they would forfeit coauthorship. We sent an email to the recalcitrant coauthor (we did not have a postal address because the institution had requested this individual be deported), copying in the other authors, detailing the many attempts to reach him/her, and explaining that if we did not hear back from him/her within 6 weeks from the date of acceptance we would proceed with publication without his/her name listed as an author.

Normally of course our policies require that someone who does not meet the standard of authorship is named in the acknowledgements. However, because we also require anyone named in the acknowledgements to give their permission for this, we decided that if this person did not respond, we would ask the authors to acknowledge the person's involvement by referring to their job title—for example, “The authors acknowledge the assistance of a medical student in the early phases of this study”. (The phrasing is a little awkward but we felt it was important to include it. If it later came to light that there was evidence of misconduct in the study, we felt it needed to be clear from the outset that there was someone else involved in the work.)

Fortunately, in this case, the first author was eventually able to convince the non-responding author to confirm coauthorship, so we did not have to carry through our threat. However, we want to be prepared in case a similar situation arises again, and so we are considering updating our information for authors to include a policy of forfeiting coauthorship after a 6 week period has elapsed without response.

### **Question(s) for the COPE Forum**

- (1) What is COPE's view of our proposed policy of requiring coauthors to respond or forfeit their coauthorship status?
- (2) If it is not appropriate, should we have refused to proceed with publication until the authors resolved the issue?

- (3) If the authors' institution had stepped in and ruled on how the dispute should be resolved, should we have accepted their ruling, despite their being a party to a lawsuit?
- (4) If the forfeiture process is considered appropriate, may we still retain our policy that an author who dies may be named as a coauthor if the corresponding author attests that to the best of his/her knowledge, the deceased individual met the definition of authorship up to the point of death, and all the authors agree?
- (5) What about an incapacitated author (we have a manuscript working its way to acceptance where a coauthor is in a coma)?

### **14-03 Image manipulation as a general practice (BH)**

As managing editor, I view all manuscripts before they are assigned to an editor. Within a 4 week period, I have detected five manuscripts where photographs of either gels or plant materials were used twice or three times in the same manuscript. These manuscripts were immediately rejected.

However, we are not convinced that these are cases of deliberate misleading of the scientific community. It rather seems to us that many laboratories consider photographs as illustrations that can be manipulated, and not as original data. Thus gels are often cleaned of impurities, bands are cut out and photographs of plant material only serve to show what the authors want to demonstrate, and the material does not necessarily originate from the experiment in question.

When the editor-in-chief rejected such a manuscript, a typical response was: “I am surprised by the question and problem you pointed out in our manuscript. I checked the pictures you mentioned and I agree that they are really identical. But please be reminded that the purpose of these gel pictures was only to show the different types of banding pattern, and the gels of a few specific types were not very clear, so my PhD student repeatedly used the clearer ones. This misleading usage does not have an influence on data statistics or the final conclusion”.

### **Question(s) for the COPE Forum**

- What can be done to ensure that all gels and all photographs originate from the experiment and that they should never be tampered with?
- How can the scientific community of some particular countries be taught correct scientific publishing standards?



## **4. UPDATES**

### **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.

**Follow up:**

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.

**Update (September 2013):**

The editor has still not had a response from the hospital director despite following up the original communication and copying in the ethical review chairman. It was agreed that the next step should be to contact the research integrity office.

**Update (February 2014):**

The editor has now had a response from the ethics committee, recognising the nature of their concern. The ethics committee is going to inform the university rector.

### **13-08 Unusually frequent submission of articles by a single author**

**Anonymised text of the case:**

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*

What would the COPE Forum suggest we do?

#### **Advice:**

The Forum suggested that it may be useful in this case to help rather than punish the author. As an initial approach, the Forum asked if there was any pastoral care available to the student, or whether the medical school has anyone who could talk to the student in a confidential manner. This may be more of a problem with the student, rather than research integrity concerns. The institution has a responsibility to its students and they need to ensure that students are sufficiently supported. So the editor should consider contacting someone in this role at the author's university.

However, that still leaves the dilemma of the unprocessed articles and what to do with them. The Forum advised that the editor needs to be certain that the articles are all from the author and that he takes responsibility for them. If there is any doubt, then the articles should not be processed. However, if the articles are genuine and have scientific merit, then they should be processed in the normal way, as there are no grounds for rejection.

The Forum also suggested contacting any co-authors on the papers for an explanation and to confirm that the papers have all been written by the author. The editor should make it clear to the author that the papers are on hold while the issue is satisfactorily resolved.

Another suggestion was for the editor to consider contacting some higher authority or regulatory body, or ministry of research, and asking them to investigate the case.

#### **Follow up:**

As suggested by the Forum members, we did some investigations ourselves as the higher authorities, including the Vice Chancellor of the University to which the author belonged, were unresponsive.

As a sample, an Internet search was made for three of the articles. One was found to be copied in full from a similar article in another online journal.

A search was made for the correct names and email addresses of the coauthors, as those stated in the articles submitted to us were wrong. We spoke to two coauthors by telephone—one knew nothing about the concerned author or about his name being included as a coauthor. He also knew nothing about the article. Another senior coauthor spoke in favour of the author. He said, “Mr X is a very intelligent and knowledgeable researcher and writes very well”. He could not justify how Mr X could write on such diverse topics.

We received only one email reply from a senior professor. He wrote : “I was really shocked to see the paper published without my knowledge. I do not know Mr X (author). I have never met him. He has never worked with me. He has stolen my published data. I am going to forward this message to the ethics department and make a complaint on the concerned person at the university”.

We have had no comment or reply to our queries from the officials of the university. From the Internet searches made by us, we can conclude that Mr X, the medical student (author) is:

- Not only good at writing in English but is also excellent in fabricating and stealing data.
- He has the support of one or two senior faculty members of his university.
- He has been committing these unethical acts for quite a few years as there are a number of articles with his name.
- The articles submitted to our journal had fake email addresses and names, even with incorrect spellings, making contact difficult.
- The signatures of all authors were forged.

#### *Questions for the COPE Forum*

- (1) Should we just close all the files and bury the case?
- (2) If not, what steps should be taken?

#### **Advice on follow up:**

One view from the Forum was that, as suggested before, the editor should contact a higher authority, regulatory body, or ministry of research, and ask them to investigate the case, given the institution's unwillingness or inability to engage with the editor on this issue.

However, others argued that it is the responsibility of the institution to deal with this student. Institutions not responding to editors' requests is a common problem, and the advice was to contact the institution every 3 months, requesting a reply and including copies of the information on the case. The editor should say that he/she does not consider the matter closed and request that the institution investigate the case. If the institution does agree to an investigation, the editor should publish the findings of the investigation in the journal, using the text from the institution's report.

The Forum advised the editor not to accept any more papers from this author. The editor should write to all of the authors of the submitted manuscripts to say that no further papers will be considered from this student.

Regarding the published papers, the editor should consider contacting the editors of the other journals that published papers by this author.

#### **Update (December 2013):**

The Secretary National Ethics Committee updated the editor that the university was conducting an investigation. The Committee have confirmed that more misconducts had been detected against this author and the concerned authorities were still looking into the case. The Committee suggested that the journal should take an independent decision on the unprocessed articles in the journal's office. The journal plans to make a final decision on the pending articles very soon.

### **Update (February 2014):**

The Secretary National Ethics Committee told the editor that more misconduct cases had been detected against this author and the concerned authorities were still looking into the case. He suggested that the journal should take an independent decision on the unprocessed articles. The journal will make a final decision on the pending articles shortly.

### **13-09 Retraction update?**

#### **Anonymised text of the case:**

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 for the COPE Forum*

- (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?

#### **Advice:**

One view from the Forum was that as the article has already been retracted, is there any point in further updating the information. Is it worth the effort? However, others noted that it is important that the scientific record is correct, so the notice of retraction needs to be updated. It is very important that retraction is accompanied by a detailed explanation of why the article is being retracted. Retraction does not remove the paper from the literature, so it is important to be explicit about the problems with the paper, as parts of the paper may still be valid. To not update the retraction notice could be misleading for readers.

The Forum also suggested the editor might like to write an editorial on why papers are retracted.

#### **Follow up:**

The publication of a retraction statement resulted in the discovery of other problems with not only the original paper (which was retracted at the authors' request), but also with several additional articles published in our journal and other publications by the same laboratory. In short, the journal will soon publish detailed retraction statements of those articles, as well as an "update" of the original retraction statement that provides more detailed information related to the problems in the original paper (and is properly indexed and versioned with the original retraction statement). The editor is not aware of any other publications that have published updates of retractions, but given the extenuating circumstances involving the additional problems and articles, the Subcommittee on Ethical Scientific Publications of the journal feels that they owe it to the readers of the journal to clarify all of the problems with the data reported in the original paper (as well as in the other papers).

### **13-18 Claim of plagiarism in published article**

#### **Anonymised text of the case:**

Author A of a 2008 review article in our journal claims her article was used as the "framework" for a 2013 review article on the same subject in an open access journal by a

former student of hers, author B. There was no verbatim overlap but the format (comparison of two common conditions) was indeed similar (differential diagnosis, management, pharmacotherapy, and implications for practice).

Author A sent me the articles for comparison and stated that she thought this was plagiarism and that, furthermore, her student had no experience caring for these patients so she had misrepresented herself as an authority on this topic. The student (author B) was the first author, the second author was a physician who was well published on this topic, and "writing assistance" had been provided by a professional medical writer and paid by a pharmaceutical company that manufactures drugs in this therapeutic class. I checked both papers through iThenticate and there was no verbatim overlap between the two. I had nine members of my editorial board review and compare the articles in question along with the complaints of author A. I asked for specific comparisons (quantity and quality) of overlapping material and whether or not any overlap constituted plagiarism of ideas (not words). The editorial board concluded, as did I, that this format is fairly standard for clinical articles; content overlap likely resulted from similar content in practice guidelines for these conditions; neither article is 'conceptually original'; and that updates of clinical review articles are a common practice (there was a 5 year gap between the articles). We found multiple articles in the literature on the same or related topics with similar resources, content, and format.

Meanwhile, author A contacted the open access journal stating that she was consulting a lawyer and she wanted author B's article "pulled and reviewed for integrity and rigor". Within 8 days of the complaint, I wrote to author A stating that we did not find evidence of plagiarism and that I would not contact the open access journal with a claim to protect the article copyright because I did not believe it had been violated. Author A was not pleased with my response and claims she has "confirmed" with two colleagues that there are striking similarities between the articles. I reiterated based on COPE guidelines and definitions of plagiarism, there was nothing more I could do. Meanwhile, the open access journal responded to author A's email that they have "removed" the offending article by author B from their website (in fact it is still there) and they suggested she contact the author because authors retain the copyright. I referred author A to my publishing manager, who has been appraised of this investigation since the beginning, if she wishes to pursue this further.

#### *Questions for the COPE Forum*

(1) Do I have an obligation to contact the open access journal with my findings? I am reluctant to do so given there are legal implications (lawyer contacted by author A); author B's paper has not actually been removed; and there are professional medical writers and a pharmaceutical company involved in author B's paper. I had never contacted the open access journal myself and they have not contacted me but I "feel" that I might have some responsibility to let them know that we are not making any claim.

#### **Advice:**

The editor updated the Forum that the paper by author B has now been removed from the publisher's website, with no notice of formal retraction, although it is still possible to find the paper by a search of PubMed.

The Forum suggested that the style of writing of review articles may mean that this type of issue arises. Author B may have been commissioned to write the review and asked to format

it in a specific way. The Forum noted that it is possible to have plagiarism of ideas and not just words, although harder to prove, and author A may feel this is the case in this instance.

But in reality, this is an issue for the open access journal, not the editor's journal. The editor feels that the open access journal has genuinely tried to do the right thing but has just not handled the situation correctly. Should the paper in fact have been removed at all? Was there any plagiarism? By removing the paper, without issuing a retraction, the literature has not been corrected, and if the paper was not plagiarized, then what might have been a reasonable paper is no longer available. Was the editor of the open access journal pressurized into removing the paper by author A and/or its publisher because of the threat of legal action?

Is author B aware that his paper has been pulled from the journal's website? Author B and his colleagues may have legal redress against the open access journal. But it is up to the open access journal to inform author B.

Hence a suggestion was for the editor to reach out to this other editor, and perhaps discuss how this might have been handled differently. On a poll of the Forum audience, more than half agreed that the editor should reach out to the other editor, obtain their side of the story and perhaps then establish how proper correction of the literature can be done.

**Follow up:**

At the suggestion of the COPE Forum, the editor wrote to the managing editor of the online journal clarifying that the journal did not find any plagiarism with their published article and that the editor would not pursue any claims against the journal. The editor also noted that the article in question was missing from the home page of the journal on the publisher's website but that it remained available on the PubMed Central site for their journal. The editor asked that the journal update her if they were conducting an investigation themselves and offered information on the COPE guidelines.

The managing editor responded thanking the editor for the clarification and explaining that the decision had been made by the publisher to remove the article in question from their website to "avoid legal complications," which had been threatened by the complaining author. He stated he did understand that removal of the article was not recommended by COPE but because the article was still listed and retrievable on the PubMed site for their journal, they thought this was a reasonable solution. He stated he would forward the editor's letter to the editor-in-chief and the publisher to see if this would change the decision; however, the situation remains the same. There has been no retraction of the article and the editor has not heard back from either the journal managing editor or the editor-in-chief.