



Forum agenda

Meeting to be held on Wednesday 8 August 2018

Ballroom, Liberty Hotel, 215 Charles Street, Boston, MA 02114, USA

At 1.30pm–4.30pm (EST)

1. Update on COPE activities by the Chair

2. Forum discussion: What to consider when asked to peer review a manuscript

3. New cases

18-07 Inconclusive institutional investigation into authorship dispute (MC)

18-08 Scientific misconduct claim from a whistleblower where the institution will not investigate (LG)

18-09 Editor manipulation of the impact factor (MS)

18-10 Are copyrighted conference audiotapes considered "prior publication"? (SK)

4. Updates

17-15 Stolen article

17-18 Pre-publication in a discussion paper series

18-02 Dispute between two authors

18-03 Editor and reviewers requiring authors to cite their own work

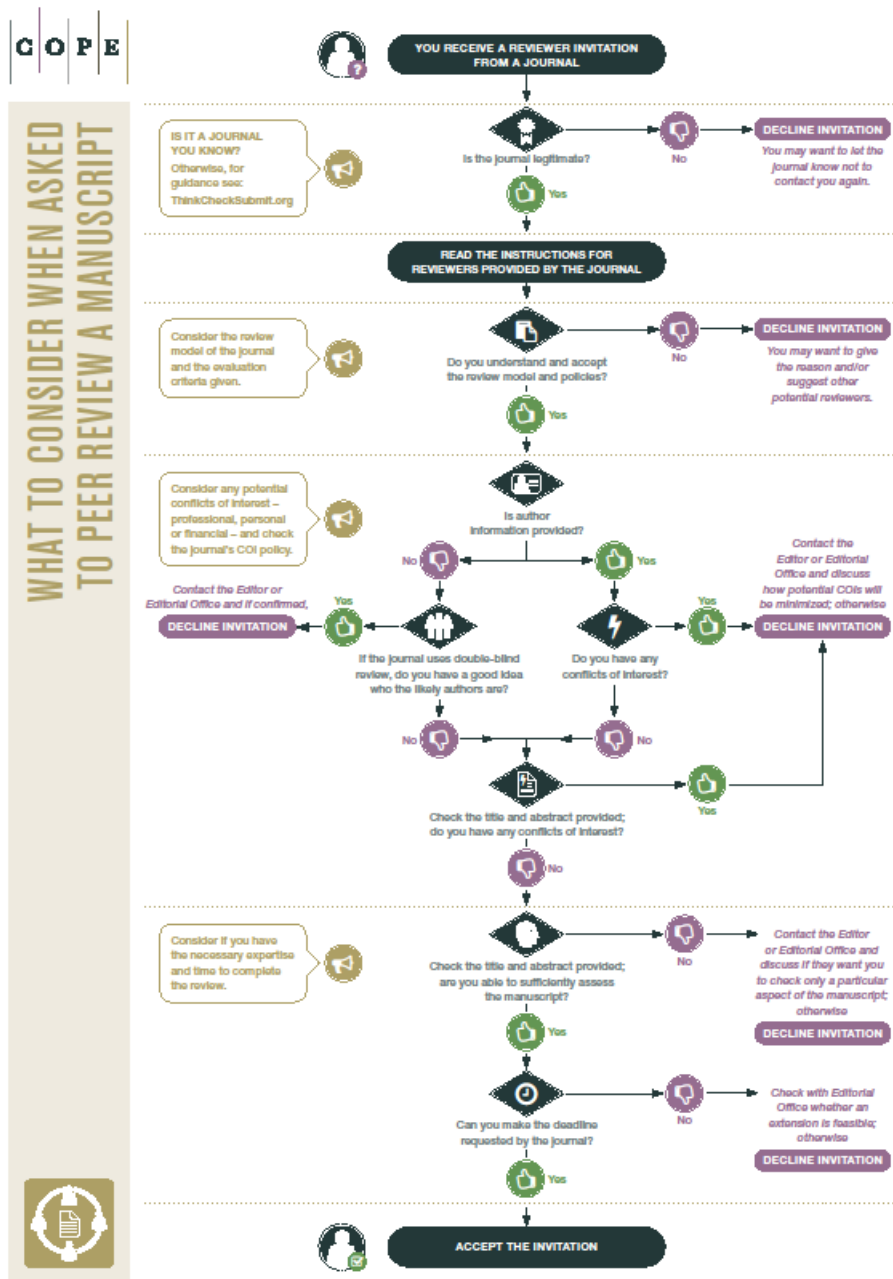
18-05 Undisclosed conflict of interest

CONTENTS

2. FORUM DISCUSSION: What to consider when asked to peer review a manuscript.....	3
3. NEW CASES.....	4
18-07 Inconclusive institutional investigation into authorship dispute (MC)	4
18-08 Scientific misconduct claim from a whistleblower where the institution will not investigate (LG).....	6
18-09 Editor manipulation of the impact factor (MS)	8
18-10 Are copyrighted conference audiotapes considered "prior publication?" (SK)	9
4. UPDATES.....	10
17-15 Stolen article	10
17-18 Pre-publication in a discussion paper series.....	11
18-02 Dispute between two authors	13
18-03 Editor and reviewers requiring authors to cite their own work.....	14
18-05 Undisclosed conflict of interest	16

2. FORUM DISCUSSION: What to consider when asked to peer review a manuscript

<https://publicationethics.org/files/What-to-consider-when-asked-to-PR.pdf>



3. NEW CASES

18-07 Inconclusive institutional investigation into authorship dispute (MC)

After publication of an article, Author A contacted the journal asking to correct their surname. Author A's name consists of two parts, but only one was included in the publication. The editor accepted this request, but asked all authors to agree to publication of an erratum. Author B (the corresponding author) immediately replied, disagreeing with publication of such an erratum. Author A informed the journal that he had a similar ongoing disagreement with Author B over Author A's name in another journal. Author A also provided proof of legal name. According to our records, Author A's name was incorrect on submission and Author A did not ask to correct it before publication (and had confirmed that the submission details were correct). When asked for an explanation of this, Author A claims not to have noticed the mistake at that time.

The journal asked Author B to explain the reason for objecting to the erratum. Author B instead replied with an accusation that Author A did not contribute to the experiments or writing of the article and therefore should be removed from the author list. The journal contacted all authors reminding them of the ICMJE authorship criteria and asking for each of them to confirm their contributions to the article. It was also explained to them that the journal was not able to judge authorship and, if the authors are unable to come to an agreement, the case would be referred to their institution for further investigation.

Author B replied insisting they have the final say on the authorship list as senior and corresponding author. Authors A and B continued to disagree over email, including the journal in this correspondence. Author A did not provide a very detailed statement of contribution. The other authors provided some statements of varying detail. Some of the authors who are still based at Author B's institution provided identical statements, agreeing that the corresponding author can decide who should be named an author on a publication.

As the authors were unable to agree authorship among themselves, the journal contacted the institution where the research took place (also where author B is currently affiliated). Author A, and some of the other co-authors, have since left the institution. The institution discussed the case with the authors still at this institution, but stated they were not allowed to contact authors who had left (including Author A). The institution forwarded the journal a statement signed by Author B and the other authors still at the institution with a similar statement to those received previously stating that Author A did not meet authorship criteria.

The journal is concerned that the institutional investigation was perfunctory as it did not consult with the original complainant, Author A. However, the journal is not in a position to judge who should and should not be an author. In the meantime, Author B had contacted the editor asking to stop the investigation and not make any changes to the article. This was not acceptable to the editor as Author A's name is still incorrect. The journal therefore restated the plan to publish an erratum to correct the name of Author A, but Author B strongly disagreed again, and again claimed that Author A should not be an author.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Given that the authors are unable to agree on authorship of this article, the institutional investigation did not consider the opinions of all authors and Author B strongly disagrees with the publication of an erratum, the journal is considering publishing an Expression of Concern. This would state that Author A has informed the journal that their name is incorrect and include the corrected name. It would also state that authorship is under dispute and that the results of an instructional investigation were inconclusive as it was only possible to speak to the authors still at the institution. Would the Forum agree that this is a reasonable solution?
- Are there any suggestions on further action the journal can take?

18-08 Scientific misconduct claim from a whistleblower where the institution will not investigate (LG)

A journal received an allegation of scientific misconduct from an anonymous individual stating they were from the group that had written the paper (Institution-1, there are two institutions involved in this research). The email stated that the scientific bases of the article were unreliable. The paper was currently with the authors who were revising the paper after the first round of review, and additional experiments were required.

The editors followed-up with the whistleblower requesting more information and their identity. The whistleblower emailed back, concealing their identity, but provided additional information, highlighting a specific component of the research as unreliable.

Institution-2 (the one that was not claimed by the whistleblower) was informed of the whistleblower. Institution-2 responded by saying that the authors believed there was an initial problem with the data used, but these had been updated and were not fabricated. Institution-2, however, was not the institution that carried out the experiments in question.

The editors made the decision to obtain more information. On resubmission of the paper, the three original reviewers looked at the manuscript but were not told about the whistleblower. All three were satisfied with the changes made to the paper and approved publication. A fourth reviewer was asked to look at the paper and told about the anonymous whistleblower. This reviewer found no clear evidence of fraud, but he could not assess the experiments in question. This reviewer did, however, raise new concerns about technical deficiencies in the work. Aside from fraud, these new issues made it unsuitable for publication in the journal.

The editors requested outside assessment from researchers with knowledge of the work to redo the informatics analyses to see if the raw data (included with the paper) gave the same results as the processed data. Again, there was no clear evidence of fraud, but there was difficulty in complete reproducibility due to poor methods descriptions and lack of access to all of the data.

At this time the whistleblower sent an email recanting his/her original statement and saying they have assessed the work and the authors have made the appropriate changes to fix everything. This was an odd email as there had been no change in the manuscript since the resubmission.

The editors ultimately decided to reject the paper based on remaining concerns of misconduct and the heavy criticism of the fourth reviewer.

The authors from Institution-1 requested a meeting with the editors. At this meeting the authors: expressly denied misconduct; showed the editors pages of data from the experiments of concern; and provided the editor with a copy of an email from an anonymous whistleblower that the leader of the group had received 2 days before the journal editor had received their anonymous email. This anonymous individual claimed to be from Institution-1, and stated that one of the authors (from Institution-1) had visited their institution and removed data.

An additional oddity is that the email addresses from the whistleblower to the editor and to the authors were created to indicate they came from the institutions claimed. Investigation of the email origins showed that the two anonymous whistleblower emails came from the same individual, not two different individuals as claimed.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- How should editors act on a tip from an anonymous whistleblower, where there is uncertainty about the unknown person's goals and that, should institutions take punitive action without investigation of the whistleblower's intent, careers could be heavily impacted.
- If the institutions, when informed, decide to take no action, do the editors have a responsibility to investigate to get a better sense of whether they should further push the institution given the authors can simply submit a paper elsewhere where those editors will not know about the potential for misconduct.
- Due to the importance for the career of individuals on this paper, can the editors aid the authors submitting elsewhere, given that the whistleblower lied, but there is no way to disprove fraud. Or should the editors provide the information about the whistleblower to the institution.

18-09 Editor manipulation of the impact factor (MS)

An editor in chief of a major medical journal in a specialty field is also an author. The editor submits a manuscript to a competing journal in the same field. The manuscript receives moderately favourable reviews and the authors are invited to respond to the reviewer input and submit a revised manuscript. In the communication from that journal's editor in chief, the authors are asked to cite additional references, both of which are from the same journal. The references are only peripherally related to the topic of the manuscript and are within the time frame of publication that will influence the impact factor.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Is using the manuscript review process to increase citations of your journal ethical?
- In a related question, is writing editorials which cite large percentages of manuscripts from your journal ethical?
- In summary, is it ethical to use these tools to influence the impact factor metric?

18-10 Are copyrighted conference audiotapes considered "prior publication?" (SK)

An editor received a query from an author: "Your guidelines are clear that presenting data at a society meeting does not preclude publication. But what if the society records the presentation, retains copyright of that recording, and posts it online? Is asking presenters to turn over copyright of a recording of data presented at a prepublication stage and disseminating the recording as they see fit crossing the "prior publication" line?"

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Are presentation audiotapes considered prior publication?
- If tapes are copyrighted, does that preclude publication?

4. UPDATES

17-15 Stolen article

At acceptance but before publication, we found article A submitted to journal A was highly similar to article B, published 5 months earlier in conference proceedings in journal B by another publisher. The abstracts were nearly identical, but the author lists and affiliations did not overlap. We asked the authors to explain this and they said article A is their own work, but it was inadvertently leaked by an unnamed medical company they work with.

We told the authors of article A that in future they must declare the role of any company in their research and consider if this may be a conflict of interests. They said their article was previously submitted 4 years ago to another publisher of journal C, who rejected it. We confirmed this with the publisher, who added that their reviewers and editor are not the authors of article B.

The authors of article A said they spoke with the first author of article B, who promised to withdraw it. Article B was retracted, with the abstract being removed and a retraction notice posted. However, the stated reason for retraction was errors. The authors of article A said they were surprised by this.

What we know appears to be consistent with the authors of article A being the genuine authors, but the authors of article A told us the company does not want to be involved in this matter and they asked to withdraw article A, which we did. We have not contacted the authors or publisher of article B. We advised the authors of article A to contact the institutions of the authors of article B and the editor and publisher of journal B; we suggested they do not necessarily need to share details of the company because proof they are the original authors and the authors of article B are not, may be enough for an investigation. The authors of article A said they would consider this.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Could we have handled this case differently?
- Should we contact the publisher of article B?
- Should we ask the institution of the authors of article A and/or article B to investigate?

Advice:

The Forum was updated that there has been a further development: one of the authors of article A submitted a new article to the journal, a shorter version of which was published in the conference proceedings.

Generally, COPE recommends that authorship issues should be resolved at the institutional level. Institutions are best placed to investigate these issues, especially if there was a medical device company or drug company involved who funded the work. The institution should have a record of this involvement and they may be able to provide additional information. Also, the further misconduct of one of the authors of article A may indicate a pattern of unethical behaviour which needs to be addressed by the journal, but also by the institution.

The Forum was told that the journal plans to contact the author regarding the latest submission and ask for an explanation. The journal also plans to contact the authors of the conference proceedings to see if they have any insight as to how a different author group submitted the same work to the journal. After evaluating the responses, the journal may then contact the institutions of the authors of article A and possibly also the institutions of the authors of article B. The Forum agreed this was a sensible course of action.

Follow-up

The authors of the latest submission and those of the conference proceeding said they had collaborated, that the conference proceeding was preliminary work, and the authors of the conference proceeding should have been acknowledged in the submission. Because of the similar issue with the previous article by the same authors, the journal still had concerns and declined to further consider the submission. The journal is asking the institutions to investigate.

Follow-up (July 2018)

The journal contacted both institutions and the other publisher. The other publisher thanked the journal for this and said they will take note of their authors' actions; neither institution has responded.

17-18 Pre-publication in a discussion paper series

A submission in the economics field to an interdisciplinary social science journal was accepted, following full external review. Subsequently, the publisher wrote to the author stating that during editorial checks, it had come to their attention that a full manuscript of a paper with the same name was available in a discussion paper series and kindly asked that this version be removed from the website so that the publisher has the right of first publication.

The publisher stated that upon acceptance for publication, authors may deposit the abstract of their paper or an executive summary on this website. They said that in accordance with the publisher policy for online deposit of work, preprints or post-prints should only be deposited into institutional repositories or faculty websites following an embargo period effective on official publication of the paper. The publisher said they will not be able to proceed to publication of the paper until this issue has been resolved.

In the economics field, as in many other fields, it is standard practice to deposit in such a series an early version of a paper that is subsequently submitted for journal publication. The present case concerns a prestigious discussion paper series that has approaching 9000 entries. Since a published version would have undergone substantial changes following external review, researchers would inevitably seek out and cite the later journal version; indeed, leading websites in the field provide details of subsequent journal publication, as available. Generally, leading repositories, including this one, are unwilling to remove papers from its series.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Is the publisher's stand justified?
- Can the publisher reasonably insist on "right of first publication", even where research funding may have been secured from university or external sources?

- What should be the response of the journal editor?
- Are there differences in accepted practice across disciplines?

Advice

Many journals now accept papers that have previously been published as “preprints”. Preprints have a formal DOI so are generally considered prior publication, in contrast with the discussion papers described in this case.

If the editor wishes to publish the paper, and it is standard practice in his field, then the Forum agreed he should have full editorial independence. The publisher should not interfere in the decision, especially if a consensus or joint solution has not been agreed by the editor and publisher.

The Forum advised that the journal needs a very specific and transparent policy, stating clearly in its author instructions what the journal will publish and in what form. The issue can be very complicated for authors when different publishers or even different journals within the same publisher have different policies. The advice was to have a discussion and resolve the issue with the publisher.

In 2014, there was a Forum discussion on a related issue “Issues related to papers submitted to discussion journals”

(http://publicationethics.org/files/u7141/Forum%20Discussion%20summary_Issues%20related%20to%20papers%20submitted%20to%20%20“discussion”%20journals_final%20%281%29.pdf) which reminds us that whether a DOI has been assigned and if the former version is hosted by a publisher are also factors that need to be taken into account. The usual practice is not to remove former versions but to link to later ones.

Follow-up

The editor brought the advice offered at the Forum to the attention of the Publisher. Following internal discussions, a new policy was adopted, and published, by the publisher, very much in agreement with the advice offered at the COPE Forum.

The new policy (edited version) states:

“Publisher does not consider a working paper prior publication, nor would the existence of a working paper online disqualify an article from being considered for publication.

Additionally, Publisher would not expect a working paper to be removed from its server or conference website. However, this policy is only applicable if:

- *The author declares to the journal editor on submission of their article that a working paper upon which the paper is based is publicly available;*
- *It is expected that the submitted article is substantially developed from the working paper, be it with further discussion or a different conclusion;*
- *Any working paper must be fully referenced on the submitted article, such as ‘This article is based upon a working paper X, hosted on X.’;*
- *Authors should not assign copyright when uploading their work to a preprint server or conference website.*
- *This policy does not apply to any working paper that has been included in a conference proceeding volume or publication which has received an ISSN or ISBN.”*

Thus the journal was able to publish the paper in the special issue without further hindrance.

18-02 Dispute between two authors

A manuscript was submitted by author A to our journal. The content of the paper was controversial. We sent this manuscript for peer review by two clinical reviewers. We wrote back to author A requesting major revisions to address the concerns and issues raised by the reviewers. A revised paper was submitted and accepted for publication.

Because the article was controversial, mini-commentaries were commissioned from authors B and C to be published together with the paper. Mini-commentaries are short articles with a word limit of 500 words and by invitation only, usually written by an editor or referee, although they can also be authored by a third party at the discretion of the editors. Their aim is to provide a clinical or research perspective relating to the manuscript being referenced in order to provide a different overview of the research findings (ie, they can be personal opinions in some cases). These are then published with the referenced manuscript in the same issue of the journal.

Author A's manuscript was published together with the mini-commentaries. The mini-commentary by author C disputed the findings in the paper by author A and stated that in their opinion.

Three years later, we received a letter of concern from author A alleging scientific misconduct by author C and demanding that we retract the mini-commentary written by author C. Following discussion among the senior editors of the journal, permission was obtained from author A to allow author C to have sight of this letter in order to allow a response to be made to the accusations made by author A, which were somewhat intemperate in tone (including accusations of falsification, fabrication, duplication and violation of scientific integrity). Author C responded that the accusations raised by author A were absurd and recommended that the journal ignore them. Author C provided some publications supporting his views.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Currently, the editors do not see any scientific reason why the opinions expressed by author C should be retracted. The views expressed are personal but there is scientific evidence to support them. Author C did not suggest that author A was fraudulent, merely mistaken. The editors currently consider that they have no need to adjudicate between two opposing scientific views, for which each protagonist can cite evidence. Does COPE agree?
- In view of its intemperate language, the editors currently feel that it would not be appropriate to publish the letter from author A criticizing the mini-commentary. While the editors wish to publish all letters within reason, we feel that it is justified to decline publication if we feel the author has not made a substantive point or if they use inappropriate language. Does COPE agree?
- Should we invite author A to submit a reasoned letter without accusations of scientific misconduct to see if this is then suitable for publication?
- If author A agrees to submit such a revised letter, we would plan to invite a reply from author C but publish one or both irrespective of the response from author C (eg, they might decline to reply). Does COPE agree that this is appropriate?

Advice

The Forum noted that unless author A has new evidence he can produce that would dispute author's C criticisms of the original paper, is there any value in publishing further commentaries? Did the letter from author A have anything of value? However, in the interests of transparency, the editor could encourage author A to submit a more reasoned letter. The editor should stress that the letter needs to be scientific and not libellous. The editor can also edit the letter if necessary; it is acceptable to remove inflammatory or derogatory comments. If author A is prepared to follow this course, then an exchange of letters in the journal on scientific differences would be appropriate.

For controversial articles in particular, the journal may wish to consider sharing letters with the authors prior to publication, allowing them to correct any factual inaccuracies, to avoid a similar issue arising in the future.

Follow-up

After the discussion at the Forum, the journal decided not to take any further action. The consensus was that there were no grounds to retract author C's mini commentary. There was not enough of value in author A's letter to pursue the idea of publishing a version of it in the journal.

The editor communicated the decision to author A and eventually informed the individual that the journal would not enter into further correspondence regarding this matter. The editor considers the case closed.

18-03 Editor and reviewers requiring authors to cite their own work

A staff member in our editorial office noticed a decision letter where a handling editor instructed an author to cite an article published by the handling editor. The staff member wondered if this had happened before and reviewed recent decision letters by that editor. This revealed a concerning pattern of behaviour—the handling editor's decision letters (including reviewers' comments) asked authors to add citations of his work more than 50 times, three times more often than he asked authors to add citation of work he did not co-author.

Looking more closely, the handling editor frequently invited the same four reviewers to review the papers he handled. The requests for added citations sometimes came from those reviewers, and sometimes from the handling editor alone. The handling editor asked for his own papers to be cited more than 20 times and never personally requested citation of papers that were not his own. The four regular reviewers requested citation of the handling editor's work much more frequently than they requested citation of papers he had not authored, and most of the citations they requested that were not the handling editor's were of papers they themselves had co-authored.

In at least one case, an author did not add the citation of the handling editor's paper as requested, so the handling editor returned the paper to the author again with the request that the citation be added. This created concern that he was requiring authors to add these citations before he would accept their papers. According to COPE's ethics guidelines for peer reviewers, reviewers should "refrain from suggesting that authors include citations to your (or an associate's) work merely to increase citation counts or to enhance the visibility of your or

your associate's work; suggestions must be based on valid academic or technological reasons.”

The staff member brought the issue to the journal's editor-in-chief to see if there was legitimate scientific reason for these papers to be cited. (Note: in our editorial structure, handling editors make final decisions about papers; the editor-in-chief does not normally review decision letters before they are sent out). After reviewing the papers in question, the editor-in-chief did not see a reason why these additional citations were scientifically necessary. The editor-in-chief then consulted with the journal's editorial board (handling editors are not part of the editorial board). The editorial board agreed that they could not see a scientific reason why these citations were requested. The editor-in-chief and editorial board drafted a letter to the handling editor to ask him to explain the pattern and why he requested these additional citations. The editorial board and editor-in-chief agreed to wait until hearing from the handling editor before contacting the reviewers.

The handling editor responded with a letter that stated that he requested citation of his own work more often than others' work because he was most familiar with his own work. He then stated that he found the inquiry from the editorial board to be offensive and resigned immediately. The editor-in-chief and editorial board decided that the resignation was sufficient and closed the case.

In response to this case, the journal staff have added time to the journal's annual meeting with the handling editors for review of editorial ethics, to ensure that all editors are familiar with COPE and the journal's ethical standards. The journal's code of ethics is also included in the handbook provided to all handling editors, and editors will be asked to sign an agreement stating that they have read and agree to the code of ethics each year.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- What if anything should the journal have done differently? Are there other actions the journal should have taken?
- Should the journal have reached out to the reviewers as well, or was reaching out to the handling editor sufficient?
- Do other journals have safeguards in place that would help identify a pattern such as this one more easily?

Advice

The Forum advised that any suggested citations to a paper must advance the argument within the article. There can be circumstances where there are genuine suggestions for additional citations which may improve the quality of the paper, but these should not be a condition of acceptance. However, this case appears to be a blatant example of problematic and unethical behaviour. The Forum agreed with the actions of the journal and commended the journal in terms of educating their handling editors. The Forum suggested that the journal may wish to add to their decision letters that acceptance is not contingent on adding specific references suggested by editors. The journal could also review all the decision letters before they are sent out. Although this could be quite labour intensive, it would prevent these patterns of behaviour in the future.

The journal may also wish to consider providing more education for reviewers with a reminder of their responsibilities. The editor may wish to share the COPE Ethical Guidelines

for Peer Reviewers (<https://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines-new/cope-ethical-guid...>).

Follow-up

The journal is working on implementing additional steps in the submission process to prevent similar issues in the future. The editor considers the case closed.

18-05 Undisclosed conflict of interest

We published two peer-reviewed articles—one protocol and one paper with the results of a comparative analysis comparing a group of people associated with a specific “complementary medicine health care organization” (CMG), with the general population, which concludes that the group has “unusual health indicators” (more favourable than the general population).

The papers originally contained a conflict of interest (COI) statement stating that the authors were “insiders, in that they attend CMG events. However, they have received no funding, reimbursement, or other consideration from CMG or its stakeholders, and no instructions or directions of any kind from CMG or its stakeholders. No other competing interests exist.”

Our freelance copyeditor edited this statement out, to read “Conflicts of interest: None declared”, because “attending events” is not normally something that would be considered a COI. The authors approved the galleys and did not object to these copyediting changes.

Shortly after publication, we received a 12-page letter from a journalist, detailing extensive undisclosed COIs of the authors. The letter was also addressed to another journal which published another protocol from the group, as well as to the university (the lead author is associated with the university). In the letter, the CMG movement is characterized as a controversial, multimillion dollar international enterprise. The healing modalities promoted by CMG do not appear to be evidence based. In the letter, evidence was provided showing that all researchers are long term public promoters of the CMG enterprise, as well as being spiritual adherents to the CMG ‘religion’. One author is a former CMG company director. The letter also says that the lead researcher is the spouse of a current CMG “company director” (which is disputed by the author). The corporation is owned by another corporation which in turned is owned by the founder of the CMG enterprise.

As alleged in the letter (and confirmed by our own internet searches), all authors are influential persons within the CMG spiritual and business community. We confronted the lead author with these allegations and asked the authors to provide a more detailed COI statement for a possible correction of the original papers. In response, the lead author submitted a 1-page revised COI statement detailing that all four authors have varying degrees of association with the CMG and are members of the “Practitioners’ Association” which is the body regulating practitioners who are qualified to practice CMG modalities. Two authors have “occasionally offered paid private healing sessions”. The revised COI by the author also alleged that “all authors have experienced substantial health benefits since they started visiting CMG events”. In addition, they all have published blogs on CMG associated websites. The wife of the lead author is—according to the revised COI—involved in “voluntary activities around producing content for a CMG associated company and is a “company secretary” of the CMG associated company and “does this in an honorary capacity.

She is not a director or shareholder” and “does not receive any financial incentives” from CMG.

We consulted the original peer reviewers, showing them the updated COI. They said they would not have accepted the manuscript had they known about these extensive COIs. We suggested to the authors that we feel that both articles should be retracted, and we would prefer to do this with their consent.

The lead author rejected this with the argument that “we originally submitted a COI statement which the journal removed. Subsequently, you falsely asserted that my wife, is a Director and employee of a CMG associated company when she clearly isn’t and has never received any fund from CMG.”

We checked the company registration and the spouse is actually listed as company secretary, which is considered an ‘officer’ of a corporation in the country of registration, so they have many of the same duties and obligations as directors. Our concerns with the COI of the lead author (and his spouse) go beyond financial COIs, as in his blog the lead author describes how meeting the CMG founder “changed our lives profoundly”, and his spouse is describing “seemingly miraculous changes” as a result of CMG. This level of passion for CMG and their involvement may affect the authors’ scientific judgement.

The university has launched an investigation as a result of the journalists’ letter, but the investigation is not complete. Meanwhile, the case has also been picked up by the mainstream media, who is putting pressure on the university to distance themselves from CMG, which is described by the media as a “cult”.

Question(s) for the COPE Forum

- Should we publish the updated COI statement as a corrigendum, perhaps with a notice of editorial concern, and wait for the outcome of the university investigation to decide on further steps.
- Or should we retract the papers due to non-disclosure of COI (and also due to concerns over the content and practices of the CMG enterprise, the scope of which neither reviewers nor editor were aware of when accepting the paper)?
- Is there any third option we have not thought of?

Advice

The Forum advised that there do not appear to be grounds for retraction. The COPE guidelines on retraction state that “Retraction should usually be reserved for publications that are so seriously flawed (for whatever reason) that their findings or conclusions should not be relied upon.” A conflict of interest is not in itself a reason to retract an article, particularly in an original research paper, unless there are serious concerns with the data. Hence the Forum would agree with the publication of an updated COI statement as a corrigendum, perhaps with an editorial notice. The Forum also suggested collaborating with the institution on their investigation. If the institution finds there are fabricated or serious flaws in the data, then the editor may wish to consider retracting the article. But a retraction at this stage is not appropriate.

Follow-up

The journal published two expressions of editorial concerns and corrections (one for the protocol and one for the final paper, correcting the conflict of interest disclosure as well as correcting the data, as per the corrigendum submitted by the authors). Regarding the third paper, a protocol published by another publisher, to our knowledge they have not taken any action, such as publishing an expression of editorial or updating the conflict of interest. The journal is collaborating with the authors' institution which is currently still investigating this case, and will await their recommendation on whether or not the paper should be marked as retracted.