



PRESS RELEASE

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Universities need to work with journal editors to tackle research misconduct by their staff

Universities and other institutions have a responsibility to work with academic journal editors to investigate and tackle research misconduct by their employees. But some see misconduct as an embarrassment and may avoid an investigation in case it damages their reputation, according to COPE, the Committee on Publication Ethics.

That's why the charity, which advises major academic publishers worldwide, is calling for all research institutions to employ a research integrity officer or bring in external experts who can investigate complaints objectively.

The recommendation is a key element in new guidelines on the need for cooperation between research institutions and journals in research integrity cases. Issued after extensive international consultation with academics from universities and other institutions, the guidelines have been drawn up with the help of leading figures from more than a dozen countries, including the USA, UK, Australia, China, Brazil, India, Sweden, Germany and Croatia.

"Institutions and journals both have important duties relating to research and publication misconduct" says COPE's Chair Dr Elizabeth Wager, a freelance publications consultant, who co-authored the guidelines with COPE's Vice-chair Dr Sabine Kleinert, Senior Executive Editor of The Lancet.

"Institutions are responsible for the conduct of their researchers and for encouraging a healthy research environment. Journals are responsible for the conduct of their editors, for safeguarding the research record and for ensuring the reliability of everything they publish. It is therefore important for institutions and journals to communicate and collaborate effectively on cases of suspected misconduct."

A recent analysis paper by Dr Wager published in the BMJ underlined how difficult it can be for journal editors to resolve misconduct issues with the institutions who employ researchers. Common problems included institutions failing to respond to concerns raised by editors, carrying out improper or protracted investigations or no investigation at all and failing to communicate the outcome to journal editors.

“Institutions should recognise the need to work with editors to ensure that allegations are investigated and that flawed publications are corrected or retracted” says Dr Wager in the paper.

She goes on to point out that while organisations should see misconduct investigations as good governance, rather than an embarrassment, some may avoid carrying out an investigation in case it damages their reputation.

“Institutions therefore have an inherent conflict of interest in investigating misconduct and this needs to be counterbalanced or mitigated as far as possible.”

The new COPE guidelines make the following recommendations.

Institutions should:

- have a research integrity officer (or office) and publish their contact details prominently
- inform journals about cases of proven misconduct that affect the reliability or attribution of work that they have published
- respond to journals if they request information about issues, such as disputed authorship, misleading reporting, competing interests, or other factors, including honest errors, that could affect the reliability of published work
- initiate inquiries into allegations of research misconduct or unacceptable publication practice raised by journals
- have policies supporting responsible research conduct and systems in place for investigating suspected research misconduct.

Journals should:

- publish the contact details of their editor-in-chief, who should act as the point of contact for questions relating to research and publication integrity
- inform institutions if they suspect misconduct by their researchers and provide evidence to support these concerns
- cooperate with investigations and respond to institutions’ questions about misconduct allegations
- be prepared to issue retractions or corrections (according to the COPE guidelines on retractions) when provided with findings of misconduct arising from investigations
- have policies for responding to institutions and other organisations that investigate cases of research misconduct.

The guidelines on *Cooperation between research institutions and journal on research integrity cases* are online at:

http://publicationethics.org/files/Research_institutions_guidelines_final.pdf

The BMJ article is also on the COPE website at:

http://publicationethics.org/files/BMJ_institutional_responses_Oct_11.pdf

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For further information please contact
Annette Whibley, Wizard Communications
0121 445 5100 / 07941 465757 (UK)
annette.wizard@gmail.com

Notes to Editors

- Wager E, Kleinert S, on behalf of COPE Council. Cooperation between research institutions and journals on research integrity cases: guidance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). March 2012. www.publicationethics.org
- Wager E. Coping with scientific misconduct. *BMJ* 2011;343:d6586 doi: 10.1136/bmj.d6586
- COPE, the Committee on Publication Ethics, is a registered charity that was established in 1997 by a small group of medical journal editors in the UK and now has more than 7,000 members worldwide, from all disciplines. Membership is open to editors of academic journals and others interested in publication ethics. Many of the world's largest international publishers have signed up their journals as COPE members.
- COPE provides advice to editors and publishers on all aspects of publication ethics, in particular how to handle research and publication misconduct. It also provides a forum for members to discuss individual cases, funds research on publication ethics, publishes a quarterly newsletter and organises annual seminars. COPE members are expected to follow the Code of Conduct and the organisation has also developed Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors. <http://publicationethics.org>