



INTERACTIVE CASES WORKSHOP

Sunday 26 March 2017

Beijing Room, Kempinski Hotel Beijing Lufthansa Center, Beijing, China

WORKSHOP CASES

AUTHORSHIP CASES

Case 1: Author disagreement blocks submission

A paper was submitted to a journal reporting original research on human subjects. Two corresponding authors, author A and author B, were listed. During peer review, the editor received an email from author A stating that he had not read the paper, was not aware of the submission and did not agree with the submission. Author A did not provide any specific details of the disagreement.

The editor immediately contacted author B, who admitted that he had submitted the paper after many failed attempts to contact author A. The two authors performed the work in the same institution but author A had left the institution before the submission and his current address/institution was unknown to author B.

The editor instructed the peer reviewers to halt the reviewing process, pending resolution of the conflict. The editor requested that author B ask the institution to contact author A to obtain input that would allow the submission to proceed. Author B informed the editor that no response had been received from author A after 2 months. The editor was also informed that author A had taken legal action against the institution over an unrelated matter, and author B suspected that the refusal to authorize the submission may have been a strategy to help him in that dispute.

The editor suggested contacting author A's new institution but neither author B nor his institution were aware of author A's current employment.

What should the editor do?

1. Contact author A directly and try to seek approval for submission.
2. Publish the paper anyway because there was no scientific basis for the objection to submission.

Case 2: Requesting authorship after publication

A journal was contacted by Dr H who is surprised he is not listed as an author on a published paper because it utilised samples from a database that he had established. He was told that the journal conforms strictly to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) policy on authorship and he was asked for more information on his contributions.

The journal contacted the corresponding author of the article for more information. The corresponding author stated that Dr H had contributed substantially to the development of the cohort, but had not been involved in the study design, or in the evaluation or preparation of the data, and recommended publishing a correction with Dr H listed in a simple acknowledgment (not in the author list).

Dr H was not satisfied with this solution, continuing to believe that he should be listed as an author. When the journal went back to the corresponding author, he replied that after discussion with his co-authors, they had agreed that although Dr H did not fulfil the ICMJE criteria, they supported his addition as an author because their own publication policy indicated that all principal investigators involved in the development of the cohort should be listed as authors.

The journal replied to the corresponding author stating that the journal policy was to list Dr H in the acknowledgments. Adding him as an author without fulfilling the ICMJE criteria (journal policy) would be the equivalent of gift authorship.

However, Dr H still does not believe that an acknowledgment is appropriate.

What should the journal do?

1. Publish a correction that names Dr H in an acknowledgment.
2. Publish a correction that names Dr H as an author.
3. Something else (please suggest an action, with reasons).

PEER REVIEW CASES

Case 3: Compromised peer review system in published papers

An editor noticed a high volume of submissions from corresponding author A, who had mostly suggested the same preferred reviewers for each submission. However, the journal's online accounts of the preferred reviewers had suspicious email addresses, and comments were returned very quickly (within 24 hours) and were often brief (largely just commenting on grammar) and positive. All preferred reviewers favoured immediate acceptance or acceptance subject to minor revisions.

Author A was asked to provide further information on the preferred reviewers and admitted that these were either dummy accounts or associates of author A. The dummy accounts had email addresses that were accessible by author A and/or author A's students or collaborators. Author A had asked the preferred reviewers to submit favourable and quick reviews of the papers or he had submitted the reviews himself. Author A admitted using this system for a number of papers, but not every paper. Author A stated that the papers' co-authors were not aware of this activity.

Author A agreed to retract the published papers for which he admitted to influencing the peer review process.

The editor attempted to contact all of the co-authors. Only three co-authors responded; two supported the decision to issue an expression of concern, and one replied that it was unfair on the co-authors without any concrete evidence.

What should the editor do?

1. Contact the institutions of author A and his associates who were "preferred reviewers".
2. Repeat the peer review for all the remaining published papers.

Case 4: Author requests permission to publish review comments

An author submitted a manuscript to a journal critiquing an article published in the journal 6 years previously. The manuscript was reviewed by three reviewers who all recommended rejection, and was evaluated by an associate editor and a senior editor, who rejected the manuscript on the grounds that the reviewers were unconvinced by the critique and felt that it did not advance the subject. The author appealed

the decision but the decision was upheld, and the author was informed that a different critique of the published paper which sufficiently advanced the debate and moved the topic forward in a constructive manner could be considered.

The author informed the journal that he intended to make the previously submitted manuscript publicly available online, along with the reviews and a commentary on the issues raised, prior to submission to a journal that used open peer review. The author requested the journal's consent for the review comments to be made public under a Creative Commons licence.

The journal declined permission to publish the reviews explaining that the journal operates a confidential single blind review process. The journal does not currently allow reviewers to publish their own review comments for accepted manuscripts.

When the author asked to see the relevant journal guidelines, he was given a link a link to the publisher's guidelines on publication ethics on the submission site for the journal which states: "If discussions between an author, editor, and peer reviewer have taken place in confidence they should remain in confidence unless explicit consent has been given by all parties, or unless there are exceptional circumstances".

Given that the journal operates a confidential single blind review process, this guidance applies to the treatment of reviews. The editor repeated it is not appropriate to allow the review comments to be published in any form as the reviewers were not informed about potential publication of their comments before agreeing to review the manuscript. The author disagreed with this stance.

What should the editor do if the author goes ahead with publishing the reviews?

1. Remind the author he does not have the journal's consent to publish the reviews.
2. Notify the relevant reviewers and editors.
3. Something else (please suggest an action, with reasons).

PLAGIARISM CASES

Case 5: Self-plagiarism

On initial assessment of a submitted review paper with a single author, the editor checked some of the references to the author's own work that were cited in the paper. The author mentioned in the covering letter that he had published extensively on some of the specific themes of the paper, as the references made clear, but he claimed that the paper was an original synthesis of the material.

Examination of four or five easily accessible references revealed an unacceptably high proportion of direct replication: many phrases and sentences and some complete paragraphs. The paper was rejected with an explanation that this practice of self-plagiarism was unacceptable, and that the journal would be contacting the head of research ethics at the author's institution.

The author appealed the decision, saying that he had been open about previous publications and questioning why he was not allowed to repeat arguments and ideas that had been published in little known publications with a limited circulation in other fields. The journal's decision was upheld.

The editor then contacted the institution's director of research integrity. His response quoted a section from the national code for the responsible conduct of research: "It is not acceptable to repeat the reporting of identical research findings in several different publications, except in particular and clearly explained circumstances, such as review articles, anthologies, collections, or translations into another language."

The institution's decision was that the author had clearly explained that the paper was a critique and that he has published before on some of the themes, drawing attention to relevant references. The director of research integrity's conclusion was "I am of the strong opinion that the author has not committed a breach of the code for the responsible conduct of research." The issue of direct replication was not addressed in this response.

What else can the journal do?

1. Remind the author and institution about redundancy and possible breach of copyright.
2. Check the journal's instructions for authors are clear about self-plagiarism.

Case 6 What extent of plagiarism demands a retraction vs correction?

A short research paper described and tested a new method, showing proof-of-concept that the method worked; the idea for the method was presented as the authors' own.

On publication, the paper received an overwhelmingly positive response from the community. Shortly after publication of the paper, the editorial team was contacted by a PhD student and his supervisor who demanded a retraction because they had published the idea for the method on a blog 2 years earlier. Side by side comparison showed significant overlap between the blog and the article (approximately 25–30% of the article), in particular in the rationale for, and description of, the method. The text was rephrased in many places, but there were large sections that were structurally very similar between the article and the blog, and some terminology and phrases were identical. Furthermore, the method was unique in its concept and no similar proposals seemed to exist in the published scientific literature, so it seemed obvious that the blog was the main source for the overlapping sections.

When challenged by the editorial team the authors acknowledged that they should have given credit to the blog but argued that their paper was about the empirical testing of the method. It seemed obvious that credit must be given in the article to the student for proposing the method and that there is no difference between a scientific article and a blog in this respect.

In the first instance, a correction was published with rewritten text and references to the blog throughout the article, making clear the origin of the idea for the approach.

What else should the journal do?

1. Retract the article, as this is a clear case of plagiarism.
2. Inform the institutions of all the authors.
3. Something else (please suggest an action, with reasons).