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Is it time to standardize ethics guiding the peer review process?

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Abstract

While most scientific journals have well defined ethics requirements for authors, very few journals explicitly specify the ethics standards that govern the actions of editors, editorial board members, and reviewers. We believe it is time to create a standardized policy for all medical and scientific journals that guides the ethical conduct of all stakeholders in the peer review process.

In their recent article, James et al. (1) comment on the role of medical journals and the peer review process in the assessment of the cardiovascular risk of rofecoxib (Vioxx®), a selective cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) inhibitor. The authors conclude that the commercial success of rofecoxib, despite the existence of convincing data regarding its severe cardiovascular risks, provides a case-study of the failure of the medical journals and peer review process in directing appropriate drug usage. While it is an important review of the COX-2 inhibitor controversy in its own right, we believe that the article by James et al indirectly raises a more general issue on the need for more stringent standards of ethical conduct for all participants in the peer review process. With the current movement to formalize the ethical regulations and guidelines for activities in science (2), we propose that it is time for universal adoption of standardized and written guidelines by peer-reviewed scientific journals regarding the ethical conduct of all stakeholders in the peer review process.

While most scientific journals have well defined ethics requirements for authors, very few journals explicitly specify, in writing, the ethics standards that govern the actions of editors, editorial board members, and reviewers. In fact, it has been determined that of journals that require conflict of interest disclosures by authors, greater than 50% do not currently require editors or reviewers to disclose financial or other conflicts of interest (3). With two of the major publishers of scientific journals, Elsevier and Blackwell Publishing, and the HHS Office of Research of Integrity having offered suggested guidelines for ethical conduct in the peer review process (4–6), it is staggering that this number of peer-reviewed journals has been slow to adopt a standardized, written policy of ethics governing editors, reviewers and authors alike.

We submit that it is time for all scientific journals to adopt a standardized and written code of ethics which governs all stakeholders in the peer review process and not just the authors of manuscripts. This endeavor should be undertaken via the guidance of the Editors-in-Chief and should include at the minimum:

1. An explicitly stated policy in the Journal and its website regarding the ethical standards expected of authors, editors and reviewers.
2. A mandated disclosure of real or perceived conflicts of interest of authors, editors, members of the editorial board and reviewers during the submission process.
3. A detailed mechanism for editors or reviewers with real or perceived potential conflict of interests to recuse themselves from assignments that represent a conflict of interest.

We by no means suggest that the above measures be accepted as the sole measures for standardizing ethics in the peer review process. Other entities, as stated above, have provided more comprehensive guidelines for ethical conduct for all participants in the peer review

process (4–6). Our objective in writing this letter, however, is to begin the long overdue dialog regarding the adoption of written ethical guidelines by scientific journals for all stakeholders in the peer review process. We feel that creating standardized guidelines for all medical and scientific journals will prevent conflict of interest controversies involving the peer-review process. Further and most important, these ethical guidelines will act to increase the trust of both authors and readers in a fair and ethical peer review process, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality and credibility of science.

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