Challenges in publication ethics

'Some editors are failed writers, but so are most writers.'
TS Eliot (1888–1965)

Have you ever wondered what medical journal editors do? Most editors in the medical field are unpaid and the work is part of the wider culture of service provided by so many in the medical profession.

Together with the editorial board and the publisher, an editor will decide the direction of the journal. For instance, decisions are made about what sort of material should be published. One of the most common tasks, however, is the daily screening of manuscripts submitted for publication, many of which are rejected without peer review owing to poor quality, redundant material or the subject of the article being beyond the scope of the journal.

After deciding which peer reviewers to send an article to, the editor must make a final decision on a manuscript, which may not necessarily concur with the advice given by the reviewers. With this comes a huge amount of personal responsibility and one to the organisation the editor represents.

Take the example of George Lundberg, the editor of *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, who was fired from his position after 17 years with the alleged faux pas of rushing to publish an article to coincide with the Clinton impeachment hearings 'to extract political leverage.' Lundberg published research showing that 60% of college students surveyed in 1991 did not think that engaging in oral sex was classed as actually 'having sex.'¹ While neither the methods used in the survey nor the results were disputed, the timing of the publication at an awkward political juncture was. Extrapolating this, editors are therefore not just responsible for the content of what is published but also the impact of publications in the wider arena.

Editors must also handle a great deal of correspondence, including author queries and complaints, and respond to them in a timely manner. Communication with the team, the publisher, authors and readers is a vital skill.

Finally, the editor needs to deal with the journal's ethical policy when examples of plagiarism, author disputes or other forms of misconduct are evident. Breaches of publication ethics are forms of scientific misconduct that can undermine science and challenge editors, many of whom have little formal training in this field. In this respect, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), founded in 1997 as a voluntary body, has become a central player. COPE provides a discussion forum and advice as well as guidelines for scientific editors with the aim of finding practical ways to deal with forms of misconduct. The *Annals* is a member of COPE and follows its code of conduct for journal editors.² It is a privilege that the current chair of COPE, Dr Barbour, and her colleagues have written this final article in the medical publishing series about challenges in publication ethics.

I hope you have found this series useful and enjoyed reading the range of articles we have published from many experts in their fields.

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Commissioning Editor

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Being a journal editor is one of the most rewarding professional activities that a working academic, surgeon or physician will undertake and yet it can often be one of the most challenging too, especially when an editor is faced with ethical issues in his or her journal. It can be a particularly alarming time on the first occasion and it is at that point that editors may not know where to turn for advice. However, it is exactly at that time that editors need to not act alone. In this article, we set out some of these challenges, an approach to thinking about them and what resources are available.

The main challenges

Scholarly journal editors in 2016 find themselves in the midst of a profoundly changing landscape. Online publishing is virtually ubiquitous; submission and publication volumes are rising year on year, and reviewers and editors report substantial challenges in handling workflow. In addition, online tools allow for easy plagiarism, manipulation of figures, duplicate submission and even forging of identities, in particular of reviewers.¹ Pressure to publish leads increasingly to authorship disputes. This is not a new problem but one where the type of problems seen has shifted subtly, especially as multiauthored, large collaborative manuscripts become more normal. All these changes in scholarly publishing result in a greater need for formal editorship training or consultation among experts. Scholarly journal editors now increasingly feel that the way their precedent editors worked (through trial and error) cannot work in the current era.

Publication ethics issues happen at all journals

All of these issues present themselves at all journals, from the most well resourced to those that run on the smallest of resources, across all specialties, and from every institution and every country. Handling issues can be particularly complex for journal editors whose journals are published in communities where cultural beliefs may rationalise what in most of publishing would be considered unethical behaviour. Consequently, a frequent concern of such journals is to put in place processes to handle issues while being considerate of their communities' norms. This is where the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has a

particular role to play. Most of the editors who comprise COPE's 10,000+ membership are from small journals, often work in relative isolation and have limited resources at the editorial level. This is true even if the journals are printed and distributed by a large publisher.

What can individual editors do?

COPE has always been of the view that editors have a specific role in publication ethics. While they are undoubtedly just one part of a whole ecosystem around publication ethics (and the larger landscape of research ethics), journal editors have crucial roles to play.

First and most importantly, editors have a specific duty to not turn a blind eye to issues that present themselves at the journal. These may have been discovered by the editors themselves or they may be brought to their attention by reviewers, readers or other external individuals.

It is not an acceptable option to simply reject a paper in the hope that the issue associated with it will also go away. Essentially, editors have an overarching role in their responsibility for their part of the scholarly literature – and not just at their journal. In our experience, this is very much something that editors of medical and surgical journals understand, especially when a breach of publication ethics may also compromise patient safety (eg lack of appropriate ethical oversight). In this regard, they may be the first people to become aware of a more serious issue and they may be at a critical point where they can exert influence on the behaviour of authors. Editors may also be in a unique position to facilitate investigation, especially if ethical breaches extend across many articles. Coordinating a response has its own challenges.²

Second, editors should familiarise themselves with accepted practice so that they can work consistently in addressing issues. Such practices may include standard protocols for handling concerns as outlined by COPE, their publishers and their professional societies.

Third, editors have a critical mediatory role when issues arise. As with any professional activity, it is essential that correspondence and investigations are conducted in a professional manner. We have found at COPE that this can be one of the most difficult things for editors to negotiate. There is a natural tendency for editors to take criticism (from many and varied sources) of articles published in

the journal as a personal attack on them. This is exacerbated if criticisms are public, or anonymous, where the tone can become aggressive very quickly. COPE provides advice in this area. In addition to specific sets of written guidelines,⁵ we also have several routes by which editors can discuss specific issues with other COPE members and also with council members. These routes include forums where member editors can discuss their problems with other editors, specific conversations with just one or two council members, or more informal advice by email.

And fourth, editors may have an important role in establishing, collaborating with and/or improving editorial associations specific to their fields or region in order to harmonise their reactions to specific examples of publication misconduct in their local or specialised journals as well as sharing individual experiences to improve standards overall.

What's next?

Scholarly publishing will undoubtedly continue to evolve, and we can already see the seeds of this in the growing number of places for peer review following publication, the opening up of peer review more generally and the growth of different models of publishing. Despite these

changes, the role of the editor of a journal remains critical in publication ethics: to hold up standards at his or her journal and more widely, to bring to editing the same professionalism that they do elsewhere in their work, to constantly explore and be aware of new opportunities and challenges in publishing, and apply them to their specialty. Such evolution in scholarly publishing mandates moving towards professionalism in editorship and maintaining publication ethics is a crucial element of professional editorship.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare other than their affiliation with COPE.

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