

CODE OF CONDUCT AND BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR JOURNAL EDITORS

Note: This document combines the original COPE Guidelines from 1999, the Code of Conduct developed in 2003, and the Best Practice Guidelines developed in 2007. This revision was developed after wide consultation with COPE members and approved by the COPE Council on 7th March 2011.

Background/structure

The COPE Code of Conduct for Journal Editors is designed to provide a set of minimum standards to which all COPE members are expected to adhere. The Best Practice Guidelines are more aspirational and were developed in response to requests from editors for guidance about a wide range of increasingly complex ethical issues. While COPE expects all members to adhere to the Code of Conduct for Journal Editors (and will consider complaints against members who have not followed it), we realise that editors may not be able to implement all the Best Practice recommendations (which are therefore voluntary), but we hope that our suggestions will identify aspects of journal policy and practice that should be reviewed and discussed.

In this combined version of the documents, the mandatory Code of Conduct for Journal Editors standards are shown in regular script and with numbered clauses, and the more aspirational Best Practice recommendations are shown in italics.

Reference
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1. General duties and responsibilities of editors

1.1. Editors should be accountable for everything published in their journals.

This means the editors should

1.2. strive to meet the needs of readers and authors;

1.3. strive to constantly improve their journal;

1.4. have processes in place to assure the quality of the material they publish;

1.5. champion freedom of expression;

1.6. maintain the integrity of the academic record;

1.7. preclude business needs from compromising intellectual and ethical standards;

1.8. always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions and apologies when needed.

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Best Practice for Editors would include

- *actively seeking the views of authors, readers, reviewers and editorial board members about ways of improving their journal's processes*
- *encouraging and being aware of research into peer review and publishing and reassessing their journal's processes in the light of new findings*
- *working to persuade their publisher to provide appropriate resources, guidance from experts (e.g. designers, lawyers)*
- *supporting initiatives designed to reduce research and publication misconduct*
- *supporting initiatives to educate researchers about publication ethics*
- *assessing the effects of their journal policies on author and reviewer behaviour and revising policies, as required, to encourage responsible behaviour and discourage misconduct*
- *ensuring that any press releases issued by their journal reflect the message of the reported article and put it into context*

2. Relations with readers

- 2.1. Readers should be informed about who has funded research or other scholarly work and whether the funders had any role in the research and its publication and, if so, what this was.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *ensuring that all published reports and reviews of research have been reviewed by suitably qualified reviewers (including statistical review where appropriate)*
- *ensuring that non-peer-reviewed sections of their journal are clearly identified*
- *adopting processes that encourage accuracy, completeness and clarity of research reporting including technical editing and the use of appropriate guidelines and checklists (e.g. MIAME,¹ CONSORT²)*
- *considering developing a transparency policy to encourage maximum disclosure about the provenance of non-research articles³*
- *adopting authorship or contributorship systems that promote good practice (i.e. so that listings accurately reflect who did the work)⁴ and discourage misconduct (e.g. ghost and guest authors)*
- *informing readers about steps taken to ensure that submissions from members of the journal's staff or editorial board receive an objective and unbiased evaluation*

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3. Relations with authors

- 3.1. Editors' decisions to accept or reject a paper for publication should be based on the paper's importance, originality and clarity, and the study's validity and its relevance to the remit of the journal.
- 3.2. Editors should not reverse decisions to accept submissions unless serious problems are identified with the submission.
- 3.3. New editors should not overturn decisions to publish submissions made by the previous editor unless serious problems are identified.
- 3.4. A description of peer review processes should be published, and editors should be ready to justify any important deviation from the described processes.
- 3.5. Journals should have a declared mechanism for authors to appeal against editorial decisions.
- 3.6. Editors should publish guidance to authors on everything that is expected of them. This guidance should be regularly updated and should refer or link to this code.
- 3.7. Editors should provide guidance about criteria for authorship and/or who should be listed as a contributor following the standards within the relevant field.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *reviewing author instructions regularly and providing links to relevant guidelines (e.g. ICMJE⁵, Responsible research publication: international standards for authors⁶)*
- *publishing relevant competing interests for all contributors and publishing corrections if competing interests are revealed after publication*
- *ensuring that appropriate reviewers are selected for submissions (i.e. individuals who are able to judge the work and are free from disqualifying competing interests)*
- *respecting requests from authors that an individual should not review their submission, if these are well-reasoned and practicable*
- *being guided by the COPE flowcharts (<http://publicationethics.org/flowcharts>) in cases of suspected misconduct or disputed authorship*
- *publishing details of how they handle cases of suspected misconduct (e.g. with links to the COPE flowcharts)*
- *publishing submission and acceptance dates for articles*

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4. Relations with reviewers

- 4.1. Editors should provide guidance to reviewers on everything that is expected of them including the need to handle submitted material in confidence. This guidance should be regularly updated and should refer or link to this code.
- 4.2. Editors should require reviewers to disclose any potential competing interests before agreeing to review a submission.
- 4.3. Editors should have systems to ensure that peer reviewers' identities are protected unless they use an open review system that is declared to authors and reviewers.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *encouraging reviewers to comment on ethical questions and possible research and publication misconduct raised by submissions (e.g. unethical research design, insufficient detail on patient consent or protection of research subjects (including animals), inappropriate data manipulation and presentation)*
- *encouraging reviewers to comment on the originality of submissions and to be alert to redundant publication and plagiarism*
- *considering providing reviewers with tools to detect related publications (e.g. links to cited references and bibliographic searches)*
- *sending reviewers' comments to authors in their entirety unless they contain offensive or libellous remarks*
- *seeking to acknowledge the contribution of reviewers to the journal*
- *encouraging academic institutions to recognise peer review activities as part of the scholarly process*
- *monitoring the performance of peer reviewers and taking steps to ensure this is of high standard*
- *developing and maintaining a database of suitable reviewers and updating this on the basis of reviewer performance*
- *ceasing to use reviewers who consistently produce discourteous, poor quality or late reviews*
- *ensuring that the reviewer database reflects the community for their journal and adding new reviewers as needed*
- *using a wide range of sources (not just personal contacts) to identify potential new reviewers (e.g. author suggestions, bibliographic databases)*
- *following the COPE flowchart in cases of suspected reviewer misconduct*

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5. Relations with editorial board members

- 5.1. Editors should provide new editorial board members with guidelines on everything that is expected of them and should keep existing members updated on new policies and developments.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *having policies in place for handling submissions from editorial board members to ensure unbiased review*
- *identifying suitably qualified editorial board members who can actively contribute to the development and good management of the journal*
- *regularly reviewing the composition of the editorial board*
 - *providing clear guidance to editorial board members about their expected functions and duties, which might include:*
 - *acting as ambassadors for the journal*
 - *supporting and promoting the journal*
 - *seeking out the best authors and best work (e.g. from meeting abstracts) and actively encouraging submissions*
 - *reviewing submissions to the journal*
 - *accepting commissions to write editorials, reviews and commentaries on papers in their specialist area*
 - *attending and contributing to editorial board meetings*
- *consulting editorial board members periodically (e.g. once a year) to gauge their opinions about the running of the journal, informing them of any changes to journal policies and identifying future challenge*

6. Relations with journal owners and publishers

- 6.1. The relationship of editors to publishers and owners is often complex but should be based firmly on the principle of editorial independence.
- 6.2. Editors should make decisions on which articles to publish based on quality and suitability for the journal and without interference from the journal owner/publisher.
- 6.3. Editors should have a written contract(s) setting out their relationship with the journal's owner and/or publisher.
- 6.4. The terms of this contract should be in line with the COPE Code of Conduct for Journal Editors.

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Best practice for editors would include:

- *establishing mechanisms to handle disagreements between themselves and the journal owner/publisher with due process⁷*
- *communicating regularly with their journal's owner and publisher*

7. Editorial and peer review processes

- 7.1. Editors should strive to ensure that peer review at their journal is fair, unbiased and timely.
- 7.2. Editors should have systems to ensure that material submitted to their journal remains confidential while under review.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *ensuring that people involved with the editorial process (including themselves) receive adequate training and keep abreast of the latest guidelines, recommendations and evidence about peer review and journal management*
- *keeping informed about research into peer review and technological advances*
- *adopting peer review methods best suited for their journal and the research community it serves*
- *reviewing peer review practices periodically to see if improvement is possible*
- *referring troubling cases to COPE, especially when questions arise that are not addressed by the COPE flowcharts, or new types of publication misconduct are suspected*
- *considering the appointment of an ombudsperson to adjudicate in complaints that cannot be resolved internally*

8. Quality assurance

- 8.1. Editors should take all reasonable steps to ensure the quality of the material they publish, recognising that journals and sections within journals will have different aims and standards.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *having systems in place to detect falsified data (e.g. inappropriately manipulated photographic images or plagiarised text) either for routine use or when suspicions are raised*
- *basing decisions about journal house style on relevant evidence of factors that raise the quality of reporting (e.g. adopting structured abstracts, applying guidance such as CONSORT2) rather than simply on aesthetic grounds or personal preference*

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9. Protecting individual data

- 9.1. Editors must obey laws on confidentiality in their own jurisdiction. Regardless of local statutes, however, they should always protect the confidentiality of individual information obtained in the course of research or professional interactions (e.g. between doctors and patients). It is therefore almost always necessary to obtain written informed consent for publication from people who might recognise themselves or be identified by others (e.g. from case reports or photographs). It may be possible to publish individual information without explicit consent if public interest considerations outweigh possible harms, it is impossible to obtain consent and a reasonable individual would be unlikely to object to publication.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *publishing their policy on publishing individual data (e.g. identifiable personal details or images) and explaining this clearly to authors*

Note that consent to take part in research or undergo treatment is not the same as consent to publish personal details, images or quotations.

10. Encouraging ethical research (e.g. research involving humans or animals)

- 10.1. Editors should endeavour to ensure that research they publish was carried out according to the relevant internationally accepted guidelines (e.g. the Declaration of Helsinki⁸ for clinical research, the AERA and BERA guidelines for educational research⁹⁻¹¹).
- 10.2. Editors should seek assurances that all research has been approved by an appropriate body (e.g. research ethics committee, institutional review board) where one exists. However, editors should recognise that such approval does not guarantee that the research is ethical.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *being prepared to request evidence of ethical research approval and to question authors about ethical aspects (such as how research participant consent was obtained or what methods were employed to minimize animal suffering) if concerns are raised or clarifications are needed*
- *ensuring that reports of clinical trials cite compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki⁸, Good Clinical Practice¹² and other relevant guidelines to safeguard participants*
- *ensuring that reports of experiments on, or studies of, animals cite compliance with the US Department of Health and Human Services Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals¹³ or other relevant guidelines*
- *appointing a journal ethics advisor or panel to advise on specific cases and review journal policies periodically*

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11. Dealing with possible misconduct

- 11.1. Editors have a duty to act if they suspect misconduct or if an allegation of misconduct is brought to them. This duty extends to both published and unpublished papers.
- 11.2. Editors should not simply reject papers that raise concerns about possible misconduct. They are ethically obliged to pursue alleged cases.
- 11.3. Editors should follow the COPE flowcharts¹⁴ where applicable.
- 11.4. Editors should first seek a response from those suspected of misconduct. If they are not satisfied with the response, they should ask the relevant employers, or institution, or some appropriate body (perhaps a regulatory body or national research integrity organization) to investigate.
- 11.5. Editors should make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a proper investigation into alleged misconduct is conducted; if this does not happen, editors should make all reasonable attempts to persist in obtaining a resolution to the problem. This is an onerous but important duty.

12. Ensuring the integrity of the academic record

- 12.1. Errors, inaccurate or misleading statements must be corrected promptly and with due prominence.
- 12.2. Editors should follow the COPE guidelines on retractions¹⁵.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *taking steps to reduce covert redundant publication (e.g. by requiring all clinical trials to be registered)¹⁶*
- *ensuring that published material is securely archived (e.g. via online permanent repositories, such as PubMed Central)¹⁷*
- *having systems in place to give authors the opportunity to make original research articles freely available*

13. Intellectual property

- 13.1. Editors should be alert to intellectual property issues and work with their publisher to handle potential breaches of intellectual property laws and conventions.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *adopting systems for detecting plagiarism (e.g. software, searching for similar titles) in submitted items (either routinely or when suspicions are raised)*
- *supporting authors whose copyright has been breached or who have been the victims of plagiarism*
- *being prepared to work with their publisher to defend authors' rights and pursue offenders (e.g. by requesting retractions or removal of material from websites) irrespective of whether their journal holds the copyright*

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14. Encouraging debate

- 14.1. Editors should encourage and be willing to consider cogent criticisms of work published in their journal.
- 14.2. Authors of criticised material should be given the opportunity to respond.
- 14.3. Studies reporting negative results should not be excluded.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *being open to research that challenges previous work published in the journal*

15. Complaints

- 15.1. Editors should respond promptly to complaints and should ensure there is a way for dissatisfied complainants to take complaints further. This mechanism should be made clear in the journal and should include information on how to refer unresolved matters to COPE.
- 15.2. Editors should follow the procedure set out in the COPE flowchart on complaints.

16. Commercial considerations

- 16.1. Journals should have policies and systems in place to ensure that commercial considerations do not affect editorial decisions (e.g. advertising departments should operate independently from editorial departments).
- 16.2. Editors should have declared policies on advertising in relation to the content of the journal and on processes for publishing sponsored supplements.
- 16.3. Reprints should be published as they appear in the journal unless a correction needs to be included in which case it should be clearly identified.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *publishing a general description of their journal's income sources (e.g. the proportions received from display advertising, reprint sales, sponsored supplements, page charges, etc.)*
- *ensuring that the peer review process for sponsored supplements is the same as that used for the main journal*
- *ensuring that items in sponsored supplements are accepted solely on the basis of academic merit and interest to readers and decisions about such supplements are not influenced by commercial considerations*

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17. Conflicts of interest

17.1. Editors should have systems for managing their own conflicts of interest as well as those of their staff, authors, reviewers and editorial board members.

17.2. Journals should have a declared process for handling submissions from the editors, employees or members of the editorial board to ensure unbiased review

Best practice for editors would include:

- *publishing lists of relevant interests (financial, academic and other kinds) of all editorial staff and members of editorial boards (which should be updated at least annually)*

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References/further reading

1. MIAME (Minimum information about a microarray experiment): <http://www.mged.org/Workgroups/MIAME/miame.html>
2. CONSORT statement (and other reporting guidelines) can be found at: www.equator-network.org
3. BMJ transparency policy: <http://resources.bmj.com/bmj/authors/editorial-policies/transparency-policy>
4. Marusic A, et al. How the structure of contribution disclosure statements affects validity of authorship: a randomized study in a general medical journal. *Curr Med Res Opin* 2006;22:1035-44
5. ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors) uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals: http://www.icmje.org/urm_main.html
6. Responsible research publication: international standards for authors (Position statement developed at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity, Singapore, July 2010) In press, 2011)
7. World Association of Medical Editors statement on the relationship between journal editors-in-chief and owners: <http://www.wame.org/resources/policies>
8. World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki: <http://www.wma.net/e/ethicsunit/helsinki.htm>
9. American Educational Research Association ethical standards: http://www.aera.net/AboutAERA/Default.aspx?menu_id=90&id=222
10. British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines <http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guidelines/>
11. American Psychological Association ethical principles: <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>
12. Good Clinical Practice: <http://www.emea.europa.eu/pdfs/human/ich/013595en.pdf>
13. US Department of Health and Human Services Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals: <http://www.nap.edu/readingroom/books/labrats/>
14. COPE flowcharts: <http://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts>
15. COPE retraction guidelines: http://publicationethics.org/files/u661/Retractions_COPE_gline_final_3_Sept_09__2_.pdf
16. De Angelis C, et al. Clinical trial registration: a statement from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. *Lancet* 2004;364:911-2
17. PubMed Central: <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/>

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ADDENDUM

The following clause(s) have been added to the Code of Conduct for Journal Editors and will be incorporated into the Code at the next revision.

1. Editorial decisions should not be affected by the origins of the manuscript, including the nationality, ethnicity, political beliefs, race, or religion of the authors. Decisions to edit and publish should not be determined by the policies of governments or other agencies outside of the journal itself (July 2013)

COPE Code of Conduct

General duties and responsibilities of Editors

Editors should be responsible for everything published in their journals. They should:

- strive to meet the needs of readers and authors;
- constantly improve the journal;
- ensure the quality of the material they publish;
- champion freedom of expression;
- maintain the integrity of the academic record;
- preclude business needs from compromising intellectual standards;
- always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions and apologies when needed.

Relations with readers

Readers should be informed about who has funded research and on the role of the funders in the research

Relations with authors

Editors should take all reasonable steps to ensure the quality of the material they publish, recognising that journals and sections within journals will have different aims and standards.

Editors' decisions to accept or reject a paper for publication should be based only on the paper's importance, originality, and clarity, and the study's relevance to the remit of the journal.

A description of peer review processes should be published, and Editors should be ready to justify any important deviation from the described processes.

Journals should have a declared mechanism for authors to appeal against Editorial decisions.

Editors should publish guidance to authors on everything that is expected of them. This guidance should be regularly updated and should refer or link to this code.

Editors should not reverse decisions to accept submissions unless serious problems are identified with the submission.

New Editors should not overturn decisions to publish submissions made by the previous Editor unless serious problems are identified.

Relations with reviewers

Editors should publish guidance to reviewers on everything that is expected of them. This guidance should be regularly updated and should refer or link to this code.

Editors should have systems to ensure that peer reviewers' identities are protected — unless they have an open review system that is declared to authors and reviewers.

The peer-review process

Editors should have systems to ensure that material submitted to their journal remains confidential while under review.

Complaints

Editors should follow the procedure set out in the COPE flowchart.

Editors should respond promptly to complaints and should ensure there is a way for dissatisfied complainants to take complaints further. This mechanism should be made clear in the journal and should include information on how to refer unresolved matters to COPE.

Encouraging debate

Cogent criticisms of published work should be published unless Editors have convincing reasons why they cannot be. Authors of criticised material should be given the opportunity to respond.

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Studies that challenge previous work published in the journal should be given an especially sympathetic hearing.
Studies reporting negative results should not be excluded.

Encouraging academic integrity

Editors should ensure that research material they publish conforms to internationally accepted ethical guidelines.

Editors should seek assurances that all research has been approved by an appropriate body (e.g. research ethics committee, institutional review board). However, Editors should recognise that such approval does not guarantee that the research is ethical.

Protecting individual data

Editors should protect the confidentiality of individual information (e.g. that obtained through the doctor–patient relationship). It is therefore almost always necessary to obtain written informed consent from patients described in case reports and for photographs of patients. It may be possible to publish without explicit consent if the report is important to public health (or is in some other way important); consent would be unusually burdensome to obtain; and a reasonable individual would be unlikely to object to publication (all three conditions must be met).

Pursuing misconduct

Editors have a duty to act if they suspect misconduct. This duty extends to both published and unpublished papers.

Editors should not simply reject papers that raise concerns about possible misconduct. They are ethically obliged to pursue alleged cases.

Editors should first seek a response from those accused. If they are not satisfied with the response, they should ask the relevant employers or some appropriate body (perhaps a regulatory body) to investigate.

Editors should follow the COPE flowcharts where applicable ([link to flowcharts](#)).

Editors should make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a proper investigation is conducted; if this does not happen, Editors should make all reasonable attempts to persist in obtaining a resolution to the problem. This is an onerous but important duty.

Ensuring the integrity of the academic record

Whenever it is recognised that a significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distorted report has been published, it must be corrected promptly and with due prominence.

If, after an appropriate investigation, an item proves to be fraudulent, it should be retracted. The retraction should be clearly identifiable to readers and indexing systems.

Relations with journal owners and publishers.

The relationship of Editors to publishers and owners is often complex but should in each case be based firmly on the principle of Editorial independence. Notwithstanding the economic and political realities of their journals, Editors should make decisions on which articles to publish based on quality and suitability for readers rather than for immediate financial or political gain.

Commercial considerations

Editors should have declared policies on advertising in relation to the content of the journal and on processes for publishing supplements.

Misleading advertisements must be refused, and Editors must be willing to publish criticisms, according to the same criteria used for material in the rest of the journal.

Reprints should be published as they appear in the journal unless a correction is to be added.

Conflict of interest

Editors should have systems for managing their own conflicts of interest as well as those of their staff, authors, reviewers and Editorial board members.

Process for dealing with complaints against Editors referred to COPE

- A complaint may be referred to COPE by an author, reader, reviewer, Editor or publisher. Cases may only be referred if the Editor/journal in question is a member of COPE.
- In the first instance complaints against an Editor should be made directly to him or her in writing. If the complaint is not resolved satisfactorily, it should be passed to the Editor's overseeing body or ombudsman where one exists. Only complaints that have been through the journal's complaint's procedure can be referred to COPE. In referring a complaint to COPE, all relevant correspondence should be enclosed.
- COPE will accept referrals made within six months of the journal completing its own complaints procedure. COPE may consider cases outside this time period in exceptional circumstances.
- COPE will not consider complaints about the substance (rather than the process) of Editorial decisions, or criticisms about Editorial content.
- COPE will not consider referrals that relate to incidents that occurred before the publication of this code.

When a complaint is referred to COPE:

1. The referrer submits a complaint to the Administrator.
2. The COPE Administrator confirms that the complaint is:
 - a. against a member of COPE
 - b. within the remit of the Code
 - c. unresolved after passing properly through the journal's complaints procedure
 - d. relating to an incident that occurred after this code came into force (1 January 2005)
3. The referrer is asked to provide evidence, with all relevant supporting documents including correspondence relating to the hearing of the complaint by the journal, in confidence to the Chair of COPE.
4. The Chair of COPE informs the Editor of the journal in question that the complaint has been referred to COPE.
5. A number of potential scenarios may occur:
 - a. The Editor refuses to cooperate, in which case, the Chair of COPE informs the referrer and the owner of the journal.
 - b. The Editor replies stating his/her case:
 - i. The Chair of COPE, with one other nominated Council member, decides that the journal has dealt with the complaint satisfactorily and advises the referrer and Editor accordingly.
 - ii. The Chair of COPE, with one other nominated Council member, decides that there is a need for further investigation, advises the referrer and Editor accordingly, and reports this to an appropriately constituted sub committee of the COPE Council.
6. The sub-committee considering the complaint will consist of at least the Chair and three other members of COPE Council. Two of the members must not be Editors. None of the sub-committee members should belong to the same publishing group as the Editor in question.
7. If the Chair belongs to the same publishing group as the Editor in question, s/he will appoint an appropriate deputy to oversee the proceedings.
8. When the case comes to the sub-committee, the sub-committee either:
 - a. dismisses it, and the referrer and Editor are so advised and given reasons
 - b. reaches the view that a breach of the code has taken place.

When the sub-committee is of the view that a breach of the code has taken place it presents a report to the COPE Council explaining the nature of the breach and recommending a course of action.
9. The COPE Council considers the report and may modify the recommendations. The Council informs the referrer, the Editor and the owner of its final recommendations. These recommendations may include:
 - a. that the Editor apologise to the original complainant;
 - b. that the Editor publish a statement from COPE in his/her journal;
 - c. that the journal improve its processes;
 - d. that the Editor resigns from COPE membership for a period of time; or
 - e. any other action which the COPE Council feels is appropriate given the circumstances of the case.

Appeals procedure

Appeals against a COPE recommendation may be made to COPE's ombudsperson, contact details for whom will be provided on request.

Responsible research publication: international standards for editors

*A position statement developed at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity,
Singapore, July 22-24, 2010*

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Summary

- Editors are accountable and should take responsibility for everything they publish
- Editors should make fair and unbiased decisions independent from commercial consideration and ensure a fair and appropriate peer review process
- Editors should adopt editorial policies that encourage maximum transparency and complete, honest reporting
- Editors should guard the integrity of the published record by issuing corrections and retractions when needed and pursuing suspected or alleged research and publication misconduct
- Editors should pursue reviewer and editorial misconduct
- Editors should critically assess the ethical conduct of studies in humans and animals
- Peer reviewers and authors should be told what is expected of them
- Editors should have appropriate policies in place for handling editorial conflicts of interest

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Introduction

As guardians and stewards of the research record, editors should encourage authors to strive for, and adhere themselves to, the highest standards of publication ethics. Furthermore, editors are in a unique position to indirectly foster responsible conduct of research through their policies and processes. To achieve the maximum effect within the research community, ideally all editors should adhere to universal standards and good practices. While there are important differences between different fields and not all areas covered are relevant to each research community, there are important common editorial policies, processes, and principles that editors should follow to ensure the integrity of the research record.

These guidelines are a starting point and are aimed at journal editors in particular. While books and monographs are important and relevant research records in many fields, guidelines for book editors are beyond the scope of these recommendations. It is hoped that in due course such guidelines can be added to this document.

Editors should regard themselves as part of the wider professional editorial community, keep themselves abreast of relevant policies and developments, and ensure their editorial staff is trained and kept informed of relevant issues.

To be a good editor requires many more principles than are covered here. These suggested principles, policies, and processes are particularly aimed at fostering research and publication integrity.

Editorial Principles

1. Accountability and responsibility for journal content

Editors have to take responsibility for everything they publish and should have procedures and policies in place to ensure the quality of the material they publish and maintain the integrity of the published record (see paragraphs 4-8).

2. Editorial independence and integrity

An important part of the responsibility to make fair and unbiased decisions is the upholding of the principle of editorial independence and integrity.

2.1 Separating decision-making from commercial considerations

Editors should make decisions on academic merit alone and take full responsibility for their decisions. Processes must be in place to separate commercial activities within a journal from editorial processes and decisions. Editors should take an active interest in the publisher's pricing policies and strive for wide and affordable accessibility of the material they publish.

Sponsored supplements must undergo the same rigorous quality control and peer review as any other content for the journal. Decisions on such material must be made

in the same way as any other journal content. The sponsorship and role of the sponsor must be clearly declared to readers.

Advertisements need to be checked so that they follow journal guidelines, should be clearly distinguishable from other content, and should not in any way be linked to scholarly content.

2.2 Editors' relationship to the journal publisher or owner

Editors should ideally have a written contract setting out the terms and conditions of their appointment with the journal publisher or owner. The principle of editorial independence should be clearly stated in this contract. Journal publishers and owners should not have any role in decisions on content for commercial or political reasons. Publishers should not dismiss an editor because of any journal content unless there was gross editorial misconduct or an independent investigation has concluded that the editor's decision to publish was against the journal's scholarly mission.

2.3 Journal metrics and decision-making

Editors should not attempt to inappropriately influence their journal's ranking by artificially increasing any journal metric. For example, it is inappropriate to demand that references to that journal's articles are included except for genuine scholarly reasons. In general, editors should ensure that papers are reviewed on purely scholarly grounds and that authors are not pressured to cite specific publications for non-scholarly reasons.

3. Editorial confidentiality

3.1 Authors' material

If a journal operates a system where peer reviewers are chosen by editors (rather than posting papers for all to comment as a pre-print version), editors must protect the confidentiality of authors' material and remind reviewers to do so as well. In general, editors should not share submitted papers with editors of other journals, unless with the authors' agreement or in cases of alleged misconduct (see below). Editors are generally under no obligation to provide material to lawyers for court cases. Editors should not give any indication of a paper's status with the journal to anyone other than the authors. Web-based submission systems must be run in a way that prevents unauthorised access.

In the case of a misconduct investigation, it may be necessary to disclose material to third parties (e.g., an institutional investigation committee or other editors).

3.2 Reviewers

Editors should protect reviewers' identities unless operating an open peer review system. However, if reviewers wish to disclose their names, this should be permitted.

If there is alleged or suspected reviewer misconduct it may be necessary to disclose a reviewer's name to a third party.

General editorial policies

4. Encourage maximum transparency and complete and honest reporting

To advance knowledge in scholarly fields, it is important to understand why particular work was done, how it was planned and conducted and by whom, and what it adds to current knowledge. To achieve this understanding, maximum transparency and complete and honest reporting are crucial.

4.1 Authorship and responsibility

Journals should have a clear policy on authorship that follows the standards within the relevant field. They should give guidance in their information for authors on what is expected of an author and, if there are different authorship conventions within a field, they should state which they adhere to.

For multidisciplinary and collaborative research, it should be apparent to readers who has done what and who takes responsibility for the conduct and validity of which aspect of the research. Each part of the work should have at least one author who takes responsibility for its validity. For example, individual contributions and responsibilities could be stated in a contributor section. All authors are expected to have contributed significantly to the paper and to be familiar with its entire content and ideally, this should be declared in an authorship statement submitted to the journal.

When there are undisputed changes in authorship for appropriate reasons, editors should require that all authors (including any whose names are being removed from an author list) agree these in writing. Authorship disputes (i.e., disagreements on who should or should not be an author before or after publication) cannot be adjudicated by editors and should be resolved at institutional level or through other appropriate independent bodies for both published and unpublished papers. Editors should then act on the findings, for example by correcting authorship in published papers.

Journals should have a publicly declared policy on how papers submitted by editors or editorial board members are handled (see paragraph on editorial conflicts of interest: 8.2).

4.2 Conflicts of interest and role of the funding source

Editors should have policies that require all authors to declare any relevant financial and non-financial conflicts of interest and publish at least those that might influence a reader's perception of a paper, alongside the paper. The funding source of the research should be declared and published, and the role of the funding source in the conception, conduct, analysis, and reporting of the research should be stated and published.

Editors should make it clear in their information for authors if in certain sections of the journal (e.g., commissioned commentaries or review articles) certain conflicts of interest preclude authorship.

4.3 Full and honest reporting and adherence to reporting guidelines

Among the most important responsibilities of editors is to maintain a high standard in the scholarly literature. Although standards differ among journals, editors should work to ensure that all published papers make a substantial new contribution to their field. Editors should discourage so-called ‘salami publications’ (i.e., publication of the minimum publishable unit of research), avoid duplicate or redundant publication unless it is fully declared and acceptable to all (e.g., publication in a different language with cross-referencing), and encourage authors to place their work in the context of previous work (i.e., to state why this work was necessary/done, what this work adds or why a replication of previous work was required, and what readers should take away from it).

Journals should adopt policies that encourage full and honest reporting, for example, by requiring authors in fields where it is standard to submit protocols or study plans, and, where they exist, to provide evidence of adherence to relevant reporting guidelines. Although devised to improve reporting, adherence to reporting guidelines also makes it easier for editors, reviewers, and readers to judge the actual conduct of the research.

Digital image files, figures, and tables should adhere to the appropriate standards in the field. Images should not be inappropriately altered from the original or present findings in a misleading way.

Editors might also consider screening for plagiarism, duplicate or redundant publication by using anti-plagiarism software, or for image manipulation. If plagiarism or fraudulent image manipulation is detected, this should be pursued with the authors and relevant institutions (see paragraph on how to handle misconduct: 5.2)

5. Responding to criticisms and concerns

Reaction and response to published research by other researchers is an important part of scholarly debate in most fields and should generally be encouraged. In some fields, journals can facilitate this debate by publishing readers’ responses. Criticisms may be part of a general scholarly debate but can also highlight transgressions of research or publication integrity.

5.1 Ensuring integrity of the published record - corrections

When genuine errors in published work are pointed out by readers, authors, or editors, which do not render the work invalid, a correction (or erratum) should be published as soon as possible. The online version of the paper may be corrected with a date of correction and a link to the printed erratum. If the error renders the work or substantial

parts of it invalid, the paper should be retracted with an explanation as to the reason for retraction (i.e., honest error).

5.2 Ensuring the integrity of the published record – suspected research or publication misconduct

If serious concerns are raised by readers, reviewers, or others, about the conduct, validity, or reporting of academic work, editors should initially contact the authors (ideally all authors) and allow them to respond to the concerns. If that response is unsatisfactory, editors should take this to the institutional level (see below). In rare cases, mostly in the biomedical field, when concerns are very serious and the published work is likely to influence clinical practice or public health, editors should consider informing readers about these concerns, for example by issuing an ‘expression of concern’, while the investigation is ongoing. Once an investigation is concluded, the appropriate action needs to be taken by editors with an accompanying comment that explains the findings of the investigation. Editors should also respond to findings from national research integrity organisations that indicate misconduct relating to a paper published in their journal. Editors can themselves decide to retract a paper if they are convinced that serious misconduct has happened even if an investigation by an institution or national body does not recommend it.

Editors should respond to all allegations or suspicions of research or publication misconduct raised by readers, reviewers, or other editors. Editors are often the first recipients of information about such concerns and should act, even in the case of a paper that has not been accepted or has already been rejected. Beyond the specific responsibility for their journal’s publications, editors have a collective responsibility for the research record and should act whenever they become aware of potential misconduct if at all possible. Cases of possible plagiarism or duplicate/redundant publication can be assessed by editors themselves. However, in most other cases, editors should request an investigation by the institution or other appropriate bodies (after seeking an explanation from the authors first and if that explanation is unsatisfactory).

Retracted papers should be retained online, and they should be prominently marked as a retraction in all online versions, including the PDF, for the benefit of future readers. For further guidance on specific allegations and suggested actions, such as retractions, see the COPE flowcharts and retraction guidelines

(<http://publicationethics.org/flowcharts>;

http://publicationethics.org/files/u661/Retractions_COPE_gline_final_3_Sept_09__2_.pdf).

5.3 Encourage scholarly debate

All journals should consider the best mechanism by which readers can discuss papers, voice criticisms, and add to the debate (in many fields this is done via a print or on-line correspondence section). Authors may contribute to the debate by being allowed to respond to comments and criticisms where relevant. Such scholarly debate about published work should happen in a timely manner. Editors should clearly distinguish

between criticisms of the limitations of a study and criticisms that raise the possibility of research misconduct. Any criticisms that raise the possibility of misconduct should not just be published but should be further investigated even if they are received a long time after publication.

Editorial policies relevant only to journals that publish research in humans or animals

6. Critically assess and require a high standard of ethical conduct of research

Especially in biomedical research but also in social sciences and humanities, ethical conduct of research is paramount in the protection of humans and animals. Ethical oversight, appropriate consent procedures, and adherence to relevant laws are required from authors. Editors need to be vigilant to concerns in this area.

6.1 Ethics approval and ethical conduct

Editors should generally require approval of a study by an ethics committee (or institutional review board) and the assurance that it was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki for medical research in humans but, in addition, should be alert to areas of concern in the ethical conduct of research. This may mean that a paper is sent to peer reviewers with particular expertise in this area, to the journal's ethics committee if there is one, or that editors require further reassurances or evidence from authors or their institutions.

Papers may be rejected on ethical grounds even if the research had ethics committee approval.

6.2 Consent (to take part in research)

If research is done in humans, editors should ensure that a statement on the consent procedure is included in the paper. In most cases, written informed consent is the required norm. If there is any concern about the consent procedure, if the research is done in vulnerable groups, or if there are doubts about the ethical conduct, editors should ask to see the consent form and enquire further from authors, exactly how consent was obtained.

6.3 Consent (for publication)

For all case reports, small case series, and images of people, editors should require the authors to have obtained explicit consent for publication (which is different from consent to take part in research). This consent should inform participants which journal the work will be published in, make it clear that, although all efforts will be made to remove unnecessary identifiers, complete anonymity is not possible, and ideally state that the person described has seen and agreed with the submitted paper.

The signed consent form should be kept with the patient file rather than sent to the journal (to maximise data protection and confidentiality, see paragraph 6.4). There may be exceptions where it is not possible to obtain consent, for example when the person has died. In such cases, a careful consideration about possible harm is needed and out of courtesy attempts should be made to obtain assent from relatives. In very rare cases, an important public health message may justify publication without consent if it is not possible despite all efforts to obtain consent and the benefit of publication outweighs the possible harm.

6.4 Data protection and confidentiality

Editors should critically assess any potential breaches of data protection and patient confidentiality. This includes requiring properly informed consent for the actual research presented, consent for publication where applicable (see paragraph 6.3), and having editorial policies that comply with guidelines on patient confidentiality.

6.5 Adherence to relevant laws and best practice guidelines for ethical conduct

Editors should require authors to adhere to relevant national and international laws and best practice guidelines where applicable, for example when undertaking animal research. Editors should encourage registration of clinical trials.

Editorial Processes

7. Ensuring a fair and appropriate peer review process

One of the most important responsibilities of editors is organising and using peer review fairly and wisely. Editors should explain their peer review processes in the information for authors and also indicate which parts of the journal are peer reviewed.

7.1 Decision whether to review

Editors may reject a paper without peer review when it is deemed unsuitable for the journal's readers or is of poor quality. This decision should be made in a fair and unbiased way. The criteria used to make this decision should be made explicit. The decision not to send a paper for peer review should only be based on the academic content of the paper, and should not be influenced by the nature of the authors or the host institution.

7.2 Interaction with peer reviewers

Editors should use appropriate peer reviewers for papers that are considered for publication by selecting people with sufficient expertise and avoiding those with conflicts of interest. Editors should ensure that reviews are received in a timely manner.

Peer reviewers should be told what is expected of them and should be informed about any changes in editorial policies. In particular, peer reviewers should be asked to assess research and publication ethics issues (i.e., whether they think the research was done and reported ethically, or if they have any suspicions of plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, or redundant publication). Editors should have a policy to request a formal conflict of interest declaration from peer reviewers and should ask peer reviewers to inform them about any such conflict of interest at the earliest opportunity so that they can make a decision on whether an unbiased review is possible. Certain conflicts of interest may disqualify a peer reviewer. Editors should stress confidentiality of the material to peer reviewers and should require peer reviewers to inform them when they ask a colleague for help with a review or if they mentor a more junior colleague in conducting peer review. Editors should ideally have a mechanism to monitor the quality and timeliness of peer review and to provide feedback to reviewers.

7.3 Reviewer misconduct

Editors must take reviewer misconduct seriously and pursue any allegation of breach of confidentiality, non-declaration of conflicts of interest (financial or non-financial), inappropriate use of confidential material, or delay of peer review for competitive advantage. Allegations of serious reviewer misconduct, such as plagiarism, should be taken to the institutional level (for further guidance see: http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/07_Reviewer_misconduct.pdf).

7.4 Interaction with authors

Editors should make it clear to authors what the role of the peer reviewer is because this may vary from journal to journal. Some editors regard peer reviewers as advisors and may not necessarily follow (or even ask for) reviewers' recommendations on acceptance or rejection. Correspondence from editors is usually with the corresponding author, who should guarantee to involve co-authors at all stages. Communicating with all authors at first submission and at final acceptance stage can be helpful to ensure all authors are aware of the submission and have approved the publication. Normally, editors should pass on all peer reviewers' comments in their entirety. However, in exceptional cases, it may be necessary to exclude parts of a review, if it, for example, contains libellous or offensive remarks. It is important, however, that such editorial discretion is not inappropriately used to suppress inconvenient comments.

There should always be good reasons, which are clearly communicated to authors, if additional reviewers are sought at a late stage in the process.

The final editorial decision and reasons for this should be clearly communicated to authors and reviewers. If a paper is rejected, editors should ideally have an appeals process. Editors, however, are not obliged to overturn their decision.

8. Editorial decision-making

Editors are in a powerful position by making decisions on publications, which makes it very important that this process is as fair and unbiased as possible, and is in accordance with the academic vision of the particular journal.

8.1 Editorial and journal processes

All editorial processes should be made clear in the information for authors. In particular, it should be stated what is expected of authors, which types of papers are published, and how papers are handled by the journal. All editors should be fully familiar with the journal policies, vision, and scope. The final responsibility for all decisions rests with the editor-in-chief.

8.2 Editorial conflicts of interest

Editors should not be involved in decisions about papers in which they have a conflict of interest, for example if they work or have worked in the same institution and collaborated with the authors, if they own stock in a particular company, or if they have a personal relationship with the authors. Journals should have a defined process for handling such papers. Journals should also have a process in place to handle papers submitted by editors or editorial board members to ensure unbiased and independent handling of such papers. This process should be stated in the information for authors. Editorial conflicts of interests should be declared, ideally publicly.