Addressing Ethical Issues: Flow Charts from COPE Offer Guidance

When an editorial office suspects an ethical problem, how should it proceed? A set of 14 flow charts from the Committee on Publication Ethics (publicationethics.org) includes guidance in this regard. Reprinted here, with permission, are two pairs of the flow charts. The full set of flow charts can be accessed at publicationethics.org/flowcharts.
What to do if you suspect redundant (duplicate) publication

(b) Suspected redundant publication in a published article

Reader informs editor about redundant publication

Thank reader and say you plan to investigate
Get full documentary evidence if not already provided

Check degree of overlap/redundancy

Note: The instructions to authors should state the journal's policy on redundant publication
Asking authors to sign a statement or tick a box may be helpful in subsequent investigations

Major overlap/redundancy (i.e. based on same dataset with identical findings and/or evidence that authors have sought to hide redundancy, e.g. by changing title, author order or not referring to previous papers)

Author responds

No response

Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that submitted work has not been published elsewhere and documentary evidence of duplication

Minor overlap ('salami publishing' with some element of redundancy) or legitimate re-analysis (e.g. sub-group/extended follow-up/discussion aimed at different audience)

Contact author in neutral terms/expressing disappointment/explaining journal's position
Explain that secondary papers must refer to original
Discuss publishing correction giving reference to original paper
Where editor has reason to believe failure to refer to previous paper(s) was deliberate, consider informing author's superior or person responsible for research governance

Note: ICMJE advises that translations are acceptable but MUST reference the original
Editors may consider publishing a correction (i.e. the link to the original article) rather than a retraction/notice of duplicate publication in such cases

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3-6 months

Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)

Consider publishing statement of redundant publication or retraction
Inform editor of other journal involved

Contact author's institution requesting your concern is passed to author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance

Write to author (all authors if possible) explaining position and expected future behaviour

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3-6 months

Inform reader of outcome/action

Note: The instructions to authors should state the journal's policy on redundant publication
Asking authors to sign a statement or tick a box may be helpful in subsequent investigations

Authors may consider publishing a correction (i.e. the link to the original article) rather than a retraction/notice of duplicate publication in such cases.
What to do if you suspect fabricated data

(a) Suspected fabricated data in a submitted manuscript

Reviewer expresses suspicion of fabricated data

Thank reviewer, ask for evidence (if not already provided) and state your plans to investigate

Consider getting a 2nd opinion from another reviewer

Assemble evidence of fabrication

If raw data are supplied these should be assessed by a suitably qualified person, ideally in cooperation with the author's institution

Contact author to explain concerns but do not make direct accusation

Author replies

Unsatisfactory answer/admits guilt

Request raw data/lab notebooks as appropriate

Inform all authors that you intend to contact institution/regulatory body

Contact author's institution(s) requesting an investigation

No response

Satisfactory explanation

Author replies

No or unsatisfactory response

No response

Satisfactory explanation

Inform reviewer(s) of outcome Proceed with peer-review if appropriate

Contact author's institution requesting your concern is passed to author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance, if necessary coordinating with co-authors' institutions

No response

Contact regulatory body (e.g. GMC for UK doctors) requesting an enquiry

No response

Inform all authors that you intend to contact institution/regulatory body

Inform reviewer of outcome

Author cleared

Author found guilty

Apologise to author, proceed with peer-review if appropriate

Apologise to author, inform reviewer(s) of outcome Proceed with peer-review if appropriate

Inform reviewer of outcome

Reject

Inform reviewer of outcome

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What to do if you suspect fabricated data

(a) Suspected fabricated data in a published article

Reader expresses suspicion of fabricated data

Thank reader and state your plans to investigate

Consider getting a 2nd opinion from another reviewer

Assemble evidence of fabrication

Contact author to explain your concerns
Request raw data/lab notebooks as appropriate

Author replies

No response

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)

Author replies

No response

No or unsatisfactory response

Contact author's institution requesting an investigation

Contact author's institution requesting your concern is passed to author's superior and/or person responsible for research governance, if necessary coordinating with co-authors' institutions

Inform all authors you intend to contact institution/regulatory body

Apologise to author
Publish correction if necessary (e.g. if an honest error has been detected)
Inform reader of outcome

Contact regulatory body (e.g. GMC for UK doctors) requesting an enquiry

No response

Inform all authors

Author(s) guilty of fabrication

Publish retraction

Inform reader of outcome

Author(s) found not guilty

Apologise to author(s)

Inform reader of outcome

If raw data are supplied these should be assessed by a suitably qualified person, ideally in cooperation with the author's institution

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