

Ethical Dilemmas for Manuscript Editors

Panelists:

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Memphis, Tennessee

Faith McLellan

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Miriam Bloom

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Jackson, Mississippi

Julianne Chappell

Journal of the National Cancer Institute
Bethesda, Maryland

Reporter:

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Journal of the American Medical Association
Chicago, Illinois

Previous CBE sessions typically have focused on ethical "events" that occur during the peer-review process or after a manuscript's publication. Christy Wright introduced this session as an exchange of ideas, experiences, and opinions regarding ethical dilemmas faced by editors who actually put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard and attempt to improve the clarity and accuracy of scientific manuscripts. She opened the session by presenting a list of possible ethical obligations of manuscript editors (see sidebar). A show of hands and accompanying comments indicated a surprising degree of agreement with "true" as a response to the items on the list. Agreements with "false" or "it depends" seemed related primarily to respondents' professional perspectives (for example, as freelance editor, journal editor, or institutional author's editor).

Faith McLellan described ethical issues that she has confronted as an author's editor in an academic department. The problems are mainly in 2 categories: those that have to do with study design and data presentation

and those that occur during manuscript preparation. In general, when questions about the reporting of results arise, the author is referred to a statistician. Occasionally, however, a new problem is created when the author returns from the statistician's office with the original problem solved but wondering whether the statistician should now be a coauthor.

Many problems seem to result from misunderstandings about what it means to be an author in medicine and science as opposed to, for example, the humanities. Many authors listed on medical or scientific papers do not qualify for authorship according to the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). According to the ICMJE, authors must be substantially involved in the conception or design of the study or in analysis and interpretation of data, *and* in drafting the article or revising it for important intellectual content, *and* in final approval of the version to be published; they also must be able to take public responsibility for the article. Many authors, McLellan has found, are unaware of those criteria. Researchers should be encouraged to ensure that the byline lists only authors (no guests and no ghosts); to maintain a manageable, reasonable, understandable number of authors; and to list the authors in descending order according to their contributions to the work. They must also disclose potential conflicts of interest and the existence of related papers, if any.

Authors often ask whether they need institutional review board (IRB) approval for their studies (sometimes, unfortunately, after the work has been done) and how they should explain the procedure for it in their paper. McLellan tries to drive home the message that researchers must obtain IRB approval as their study is being designed, not as the manuscript's mailing label is being typed.

An important job of manuscript editors,

McLellan noted, is to educate themselves about these issues and continually educate their authors, describing the larger moral implications behind the details of publication ethics.

Miriam Bloom, a freelance author's editor, noted that most of her clients are in a country other than the United States and

Proposed Ethical Obligations of Manuscript Editors

A manuscript editor is *ethically* obligated to:

- report apparent falsification of data to the appropriate person(s)/group(s)
- report an author's failure to disclose a potential financial conflict of interest
- check reported data, given the information available, for accuracy and consistency
- discourage gift authorship
- permit printed acknowledgment of his/her editorial or writing contributions
- treat communications with authors as confidential and privileged information
- refuse coauthorship if he/she does not meet all of the appropriate criteria (journal-specific or Uniform Requirements)
- accept coauthorship if he/she meets the appropriate criteria
- delete or recommend deletion of claims or recommendations not supported by the data presented
- disclose to authors or employers his/her own potential conflicts of interest
- enhance his/her professional skills and competence through continuing education
- avoid bias or favoritism in dealing with authors
- preserve the author's style of expression
- point out, and request approval of, any editorial change that could alter meaning
- educate authors regarding ethical publication practices

that some issues are complicated by cultural differences. An example is a paper that lists the laboratory chief as the 1st author even though he or she was not involved in the research reported in the manuscript. This practice is considered appropriate and ethical in some cultures but not in others. A similar issue is self-aggrandizement and "mentor aggrandizement" through the inclusion of papers in the reference list. Bloom emphasized that in working with authors whose culture is different from one's own, it is important to recognize and be sensitive to cultural differences in perceptions of what is proper.

Julianne Chappell, managing editor of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute (JNCI)*, described an unusual ethical issue: favoritism. When, for example, a manuscript editor has a positive, perhaps long-term relationship with an author, it is unfair not to hold that author to the same standards as other authors. Manuscript editors also must be fair in dealing with an author who has a "personality problem"; you cannot punish an author for being a jerk or let him or her off

too easily merely because you can no longer bear the confrontation.

The conflict between authors' rights and journal prerogative was discussed. It is crucial to inform authors that their papers will be edited to conform to the standards of the journal, and those standards should be summarized in the journal's published information for authors. Chappell pointed out that her journal's standards are basically the same as the Uniform Requirements, which are guidelines and cannot be expected to cover all problems that can arise during manuscript editing.

Chappell and her staff monitor author compliance with reporting requirements. For example, if the study included human subjects, was their informed consent obtained? Is that stated in the paper? Does the consent conform to the requirements of the Declaration of Helsinki, and was the study approved by the IRB?

Her staff also checks data and tries to spot the absence of necessary parts. Her staff performs elementary mathematical operations to ensure that numbers and percent-

ages are consistent. Statistical data are evaluated by statistical reviewers. Chappell noted that inconsistency in data does not necessarily imply fraud. More often, errors and inconsistencies creep in during various stages of review and revision; inconsistencies can be a symptom of bad writing. But they can also signal a worse problem if, for example, the methods section states that 3 groups were studied but the paper reports on only two. Remarkably, Chappell said, serious omissions and inconsistencies sometimes persist throughout the peer-review process.

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Scientific Editor

National association seeks freelance scientific editor to edit refereed articles in its journals, *Laboratory Animal Science* and *Contemporary Topics in Laboratory Animal Science*. DVM or VMD degree and extensive editing experience preferred. Applicants with advanced degrees in biological or agricultural sciences also will be considered. Experience with ASM stylebook a plus. We'll send you articles on computer disk to be edited in a word-processing program. It takes about 1½ to 2 hours to edit one article. We pay by the hour. Send letter and CV to:

Publications Director
AALAS
70 Timber Creek Drive
Cordova TN 38018-4233

A particularly infuriating problem, Chappell stated, is duplicate publication. The *JNCI* editors do MEDLINE searches on every original-research paper before it is sent for review; they also send abstracts of the author's other papers to the reviewers. This approach is helpful, but not foolproof.

Because manuscript editors encounter these types of ethical issues every day, Chappell strongly believes that they should have a role in journals' processes for setting policies related to ethics.

In a 2nd, related session, participants worked through a case history together and then divided into small groups to discuss and debate several scenarios involving potential ethical conflicts. Group reporters presented the results of their groups' deliberations. Wright closed by noting that this topic clearly merits further consideration and that perhaps CBE should lead in the development of ethical standards for hands-on editors.