

## A Question of Believability

### Question

Having devoted days to the redaction of a clinical investigative report for your journal, you fax the edited text to the corresponding author (principal investigator) for her approval. She does not reply. A week later, a coauthor (the department chair) calls and instructs you to withdraw the paper because the data are inadequate. Doubtful, you call the corresponding author at home, only to discover that she doesn't know her paper has been withdrawn. She was fired recently and is suing her former employer. Alarmed, the corresponding author calls other journals to which she and the department chair have submitted joint articles and learns that these too have been withdrawn. She asks you to proceed with publication because her former boss is motivated by retribution rather than

scholarly concern.

When you confer with your journal's attorney, he says you may publish because all 6 authors signed your copyright agreement and none notified you in writing of a wish to withdraw his or her name. You advise the department chair of your intent to publish, with or without him, and you ask him to gather the signatures of any authors who wish to withdraw. He replies that he will but adds that he does not want the name of his university associated with the paper. You wonder how you can publish without stating where the work was done. Weeks pass, your quarterly deadline approaches, and you still have no written notification of anyone's wish to withdraw. What do you do? (*CBE Views* 1996;19(5):138)

### Solutions

Frankly, I would want to know why the principal investigator was fired. Even an unproved allegation of scholarly fraud or incompetence (which could account for the chairman's wish to withdraw all work by this author) would make me fearful to publish in the absence of clear vindication. If dismissal was for some reason other than tainted scholarship, I would either take a "proactive" approach and poll the 4 authors from whom I had heard nothing, or (better yet) take a "propassive" approach and let the article lie fallow for a quarter. A lot can happen in 3 months. Once the legal wrangling over the terms of the dismissal has ended, the chairman's objection to publication might evaporate. His failure to withdraw in writing makes me suspect that his stated reason for with-

drawal is specious and that he is merely applying pressure on his former associate and holding out for a settlement favorable to him and his department.

**James E Bagg Jr**

Executive Editor

*Texas Heart Institute Journal*

Houston, Texas

Twain once wrote about a small town where temptation was lacking and people were good. Then a temptation came along, and the good people succumbed without even recognizing it for what it was. The last Solution Corner brought to our small town of good editors the chance to do likewise by choosing the seemingly innocent option (really an egregious temptation in disguise) not to publish a disputed paper. The temptation would be greater and more egregious if the lawyer in the scenario had advised the journal not to publish. (The department chair had, after all, brought both the data and the corresponding author under suspicion; there could be fraud here, or defamation, or something else actionable. The publisher and the editors might end up in court. Better to wait until the issue resolves itself before publishing.)

Now, what's the right thing to do? If I am the redacting editor in this scenario, I run, not walk, Uniform Requirements of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors in hand, to the office of the editor-in-chief. This (we hope) Solomon-like being is dedicated to fostering, enabling, and protecting open, unfettered scientific discourse. He or she will therefore not worry about whom to believe or entertain a thought of stopping or delaying an accepted paper on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations, any bad advice notwithstanding. Rather, the paper will appear on schedule, with all authors named and the institution identified.

To some, this course may seem rash. It may be hard in this scenario to escape the refuge of the old illusion that if you do nothing (don't publish; wait and see), you do

nothing wrong. So let's rephrase the dilemma. Instead of saying the options are publish or don't publish, let's say the options are suppress information or don't suppress information. Now, what's the right thing to do?

**Julianne Chappell**

Executive Editor

*Journal of the National Cancer Institute*

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### **New Question: A Question of Credit**

You receive a freelance assignment to write an in-depth article on the global magnitude of emerging infectious diseases for submission to a major medical journal. Developing the draft requires you to do extensive library research and design a presentation format that will most clearly and concisely incorporate a wealth of interrelated issues. Your clients, a group of physicians, are very pleased with the final draft you submit and make few emendations to the article. Though you are paid for your services, you have requested and assumed all along that, since you did most of the writing, you would receive credit as a coauthor. When you meet

with the physician group, however, they point out that you have no medical degree and therefore lack authority to sign off on the scientific content of the article. In addition, they indicate their concern that your inclusion would decrease their credibility and thus the credibility of the article in the eyes of their peers. Initially so pleased with the opportunity for your work to have enormous impact on both the physician and lay community alike, you now realize that the public will be unaware of your association to the published piece. Do you have a right to claim authorship? If so, how can you logically persuade your physician-coauthors after the fact and still maintain them as clients?

Send your responses to the new question by 15 May 1997 to Della Mundy, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, Department of Medical Editing, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94612-3429; Telephone 510-987-3573; Fax 510-873-5131; e-mail: Della.Mundy@ncal.kaiperm.org.

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