

Office of Research Integrity Publishes Editors' Guide

Erin M Loos

Many journal editors have been in situations in which they suspected that scientific misconduct had occurred but were unaware of the appropriate procedures to follow. A new document from the Office of Research Integrity (ORI), a division of the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), provides editors with a step-by-step guide for handling suspect manuscripts.

Mary Scheetz, an ORI program analyst and a member of CSE, was the lead author of the document, titled *Managing Allegations of Scientific Misconduct: A Guidance Document for Editors*. "We developed this document in response to an accumulation of queries from journal editors over the years", Scheetz said.

The document also provides journal editors with information on facilitating the investigation of misconduct allegations, improving the correction of literature, and promoting research integrity. In addition, it contains summaries of cases.

The document advises editors to first determine the funding source of the

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research when handling suspect manuscripts. ORI maintains a list of contact information on other federal agencies that fund research and on some private sources of funding of biomedical research.

If the Public Health Service (PHS), another unit of DHHS, funds the research in question, ORI is authorized to receive allegations of suspect manuscripts. However, the document encourages editors to get in touch with ORI even if an agency other than PHS funds the research being reported. The ORI staff might be able to help determine whether action should be taken to address possible scientific misconduct and can also facilitate communication between the editor and the institution that received the funding.

The document notes that in some cases ORI may ask an editor to provide original manuscripts, correspondence, illustrations, computer-generated data, and reviews related to the manuscript that is the subject of an inquiry or investigation. It advises editors to retain such items "until the case is closed and all follow-up actions are complete."

Persons found to have committed scientific misconduct in PHS-supported research may be required to submit corrections or retractions to the journal in which the article was published, the document

states. ORI cannot require a journal to publish a retraction or correction; however, if an editor chooses to do so, the document advises that retractions be labeled, appear in a prominent section of the journal, be listed in the table of contents, and include the original citations.

Although the guidelines suggested by the document do not shield editors from liability associated with forwarding a suspect manuscript to ORI, the document does provide some suggestions for preventing editors from facing potential problems. The suggestions include developing procedures for handling suspect manuscripts, requiring all coauthors to sign off on the manuscript to validate their accountability for its content, and explicitly informing authors that their data may be requested during the review process or if questions arise after publication.

The document is available at ori.dhhs.gov. It also can be obtained by calling 301-443-5300 or writing to the Office of Research Integrity, Division of Education and Integrity, 5515 Security Lane, Suite 700, Rockville, MD 20852.

Scheetz said that ORI is planning a conference to be held in May 2001 that will address journal and publishing ethics. 