

◆ *Ethics in Medical Research*

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With increasing pressure to publish quickly, editors must handle ethical conflicts without taking shortcuts that could damage reputations. This session's panelists stressed that journals need to maintain clear, workable policies for managing conflicts of interest (COIs), bias, and other dilemmas. Dana St John Plette reminded the audience that this session was for guidance only; editors will need to make circumstance-appropriate decisions for their own journals.

Plette stressed that time limitations don't have to mean sacrificing ethical standards if editors maintain a balanced perspective: "We are the gatekeepers, not the police." If authors and reviewers are presented with a clearly stated COI policy, editors and publishers are not obliged to investigate the legitimacy of their disclosures.

According to Plette, an author's financial conflicts may be the easiest to identify. Less obvious are the biases that can interfere with the peer-review process:

- Intellectual bias can arise whenever

authors and reviewers don't have the same point of view.

- Academic bias surfaces when program directors review papers by colleagues at their own institutions.
- Political bias may cloud controversial research that provokes debate over subsidies and government regulation.
- Religious bias may be the most difficult to prevent because no means are available for eliciting this information from authors or reviewers.

Plette advised editors to review their policies regularly so that they can be prepared to handle issues as they arise. Journals should have formal guidelines not only for soliciting disclosures but also for issuing sanctions against violators. Aleksandra Misak, language editor, cautioned that penalties should be doled out with great discretion. Editors must carefully weigh their own duty to their readership against possible career-damaging consequences for authors.

Fortunately, reviewers often cross paths owing to their concentrated fields of expertise. Many people review grant applications in addition to articles, so lapses in disclosure are often caught before publication.

Additional guidance in policy-making was offered by Stephen Prudhomme, who has participated extensively in ethical standard-setting for the American Heart Association (AHA) journals. In the past, AHA publications used a passive approach to requesting disclosures, providing just a reminder in their instructions to authors. Now, each author must complete a checklist that categorizes the various types of acknowledgments required. Expressions like *significant relationships* and *all relevant contributions* are now clearly defined.

Prudhomme expressed the importance of integrating COI disclosure into the online submission process. In the case of AHA's journals, acknowledgment of any potential conflicts must be made before authors can

proceed to the Web page that completes their submission.

Ethical concerns don't end with conflicts of interest. By mandating that every relevant paper expressly state that an institutional review board approved the study protocol, journal editors can assure readers that the research itself was conducted ethically.

In contrast, protecting against acts of plagiarism requires a greater leap of faith. As Misak explained, scientific writing has demanded a somewhat looser definition of plagiarism. Citing an example of a nonnative English speaker who lifted a methods section from a published paper, Misak illustrated the difference between plagiarism of ideas and plagiarism of words. In this instance, the author believed that the borrowed-from source described the method more eloquently than he could have done on his own. Experts in the field agreed because the identical method was used in both studies and therefore left little room for variation in its description. No sanctions were taken against the author.

For more guidance on building a COI policy and monitoring ethical standards, the panelists recommended the following Web sites:

- www.councilofscienceeditors.org/services/policies.cfm—CSE editorial policies.
- www.councilofscienceeditors.org/events/retreat_paper_2005-02.pdf—CSE conflict-of-interest guidance document.
- www.icmje.org—Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals.
- www.publicationethics.org/uk—research from the Committee on Publication Ethics.
- www.wame.org/ethics.htm—World Association of Medical Editors recommendations for developing an ethics policy.
- www.ori.dhhs.gov—Office of Research Integrity guidelines for ethical research.

