

## Ethics Clinic, Part 1

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This session focused on decisions that editors face when encountering possible research misconduct. It began with remarks by Debra M Parrish, a lawyer with long experience in research-misconduct cases. She then led the audience in discussing editorially related cases posing various issues.

Parrish opened with a historical overview. She noted that in the United States, prominent cases of fabrication and plagiarism in the 1980s led to the requirement that institutions receiving government funding investigate allegations of research misconduct. That the process must be confidential raised questions of what information editors and readers can and should receive. Parrish identified government and other bodies investigating cases of possible research misconduct in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavia. She mentioned that China, which has started to look into such problems, has identified 192 cases of plagiarism in 2 years.

One challenge, Parrish said, is the existence of “many, many, many” definitions of research misconduct and multiple terms for it. The definitions vary among government agencies, research institutions, and countries. Some encompass only fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism; others include violation of regulations, such as those regarding use of humans and animals in research.

Parrish identified issues related to publication in the wake of scientific miscon-

duct. Among them: Who is responsible for issuing a correction? From whom should corrections be accepted? Given the wish for rapidity but completeness, at what stage should a correction be made? What should readers be told? What form should a correction take?

Then she led the audience in discussing hypothetical cases recently posed in an informal online survey of CSE members. For the survey, respondents read descriptions of situations and indicated which of the listed responses they would choose.

In the first case discussed, a figure in a manuscript had been altered. Listed options were to request an unaltered version, conduct an investigation, refer the situation to the researcher’s institution, and reject the paper. Michael Held, director of the Rockefeller University Press, said that on manuscript acceptance, a staff member at the press scrutinizes every figure for evidence of missing or altered data. Often, he said, authors are unaware that changes they made are inappropriate; such authors are informed of the problem and asked to provide the original data. If fraud seems likely, however, the press refers the case to the author’s institution. Ed Barnas, of Cambridge University Press, noted that alteration does not necessarily mean falsification. He emphasized that if an image has been enhanced, that fact should be stated.

In another case that received substantial discussion, a manuscript was alleged to contain plagiarized material. Options listed were to ask the authors’ institution to investigate, forbid further submissions, inform a government agency, and ask the authors to rewrite the paper. William Lanier, editor of *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, said that in such situations he identifies the passages in question and contacts the author. Other participants noted possible differences in seriousness of copying different amounts or types of text, remarked on the temptation of non-native-English-

speaking authors to take wording used by native speakers, and mentioned the ease of “cutting and pasting” material from the World Wide Web. Parrish commented that people who plagiarize often have extensive patterns of doing so, which journal-by-journal approaches would not detect.

Among other cases discussed were ones in which

- Data appeared “too good to be true”.
- A third party claimed that reported research had been fabricated.
- An institution asked for peer-review records.
- A person possibly deserving authorship credit had not been listed.
- An institutional official said that a paper should be withdrawn.

In closing the session, Parrish noted the multiplicity of issues and approaches related to research misconduct. She advised: “Think about these situations before the case arises.” 