

Editorial Policy Committee Ethics Clinic (Part 2)

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Groups of participants considered a single ethics scenario (which they had read beforehand) in light of real-world journal policy statements that differed among the groups. The groups presented their findings, and a general discussion followed.

Briefly, the scenario concerned a young journal owned by a commercial publisher but affiliated with a society. The journal editor, employed by the publisher, earns a percentage of any extra revenue. The society's president wants the journal to publish a supplement covering a scheduled symposium about a single class of drugs, one of which is made by a drug company offering to sponsor the supplement and advertise prominently in the journal. The editor is concerned. The symposium agenda does not offer balanced consideration of the topic, and the speakers are not high-caliber researchers. The publisher wants to proceed and offers to start a supplement series with a different international standard serial number (ISSN) to avoid compromising the journal's marginal but improving impact factor. The editor agrees to consider it.

Each group was given a different real-world journal supplement policy and asked to answer two questions: What steps should

the editor take to serve the journal and community best? Does the assigned policy statement successfully address this case, and is it complete and transparent; if not, what problems were identified?

The first question (What should the editor do?) was not related to the assigned policy statements. Various suggestions included sending the supplement content out for peer review without mention of sponsorship and creating a policy (in collaboration with the publisher) that defines the quality of an acceptable supplement.

Two groups and a number of outspoken individuals advocated for the editor's outright refusal of the supplement, considering the inherent conflict of interest and the fact that the symposium could not be improved at that point. Many individuals supported that stance. Several participants noted editors are in a difficult position in general. They are likely to be academics who see their role as generating quality rather than income and unlikely to be willing to risk their reputations. But this editor would be paid by the publisher on the basis of the revenue generated. One participant suggested that the editor needs the support of a publication committee, which the editor should have a say in forming. With regard to the ad component of the scenario, a participant asserted that there would be no problem in the supplement's absence. But there was a concern that the sponsor wanted to time the advertising to coincide with the supplement's publication.

Some of the journal guidelines addressed supplements better than others. For example, one prohibited supplements that advo-

cate the use of a single pharmaceutical agent. Another stated the editor's discretion to decline supplement proposals. Others prohibited ghost authorship and sponsor support of contributors' work and required peer review of all content.

The exercise illustrated the variety of contingencies that should be addressed by a journal's supplement policy. For example, does the editor-in-chief have the discretion to reject all or part of a proposed supplement? Is it stated explicitly that scientific quality is the main concern? Will there be a guest editor for each supplement? Is there a clear requirement for full disclosure of financial support and conflict of interest? Is full peer review required for all content? If not, how will the review be done? How is advertising handled in supplements? Does the journal reserve the right to accept ads from multiple companies? Are single-drug supplements allowed? Will supplements be marked as advertisements if supported by commercial sponsors? What role is the sponsor allowed in selecting authors or speakers or influencing content development and selection? What type of disclaimer, if any, will be published with each supplement?

Participants left wondering whether this struggling young journal could survive without supplements or with supplements, if they were of questionable quality. There were no easy answers, but many ethical problems can be prevented by an active, complete, and explicit policy statement that is adhered to by all. 