

## Editorial Policy Committee Ethics Clinic— An Interactive Discussion

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Wondering how not to ruin your relationships with editors, authors, and readers? At this popular session, more than 60 participants gathered around tables to discuss two cases posing ethical dilemmas for editors; each small group later reported on its decisions. The cases were hypothetical but derived from events witnessed by members of the CSE Editorial Policy Committee.

The first case: An editor learns that an author's institution is investigating a figure in a recently published paper for possible manipulation. The figure had been published previously in a paper in another journal. The editor learns of the investigation and previous publication from a coauthor of the earlier publication, Author A, who says that a coauthor of both papers, Author B, is responsible. Author A pushes for retractions of both papers and for statements absolving coauthors other than Author B of blame. Author A also sends a report by an outside expert to the editors of both journals, stating that it is likely that the figure was manipulated but that the original image files should be examined. The editor confronts Author B, who says that the institution's formal investigation would resolve the case.

The solution: Most participants agreed that the editor should try to address the possibility of figure manipulation before dealing with copyright infringement by duplicate publication. They advised that if the institution's investigation does not finish within a predetermined amount of time and if the coauthors cannot substanti-

ate the figure, both editors should publish letters of concern. The letters of concern should warn the scientific community that the figure is under investigation, and they should be worded so as not to accuse the authors of any misconduct. All the coauthors are responsible for a paper's integrity. By show of hands, eight participants had published a letter of concern in a similar situation; one participant had retracted the letter once the investigation was finished. Most participants agreed that because both figures have already been published, confidentiality is not at stake and the two editors should talk with each other.

The second case: An editor receives a multiauthored manuscript that reports research in a narrow field. One of the authors is the editor's former graduate student, and the two have collaborated in the last 4 years. The paper is assigned to two reviewers: one in academe and one at a pharmaceutical company. One of the reviewers has collaborated with one of the authors in the last 4 years. When one review comes back negative, the editor assigns a third reviewer, who happens to work in the same department as one of the authors. The third review is favorable, and the paper is published. Soon, a reader sends an e-mail noting that the editor and an author are in the same institution and asking whether, according to the journal's policy, there was a conflict of interest.

The solution: The participants said that the editor and one of the reviewers broke the US National Science Foundation rule that collaboration within the preceding 48 months constitutes a nonfinancial conflict of interest. Participants also cited the informal "Holiday Card Rule": If you regularly exchange holiday cards with someone, you should not serve as a reviewer or editor for that person's paper. The editorial board of the journal should have decided who should review and edit the paper. The editor should implement a policy that

encourages reviewers to disclose nonfinancial conflicts of interest. An editorial may thank the reader for pointing out "an inefficiency in editorial policy".

The participants indicated that journals should have policies dealing with research misconduct and conflicts of interest so that cases are treated consistently. 