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## Reports of Meetings

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### How to be a successful journal editor

*Oxford, January 29-30; ALPSP and PSP Consulting, in association with EASE*

Editors are busy people, so for 24 of them to travel to Oxford (from the USA, Iran, Netherlands, Germany, etc) (oh yes – and from the UK) for a two-day course on editing a journal was pretty impressive. And an impressive crowd they were. The two day course required everyone to participate, and from the start everyone took part with enthusiasm – some with gusto. From taking an active part in group exercises and discussions to sharing stories and experiences, it was evident that everyone was extremely enthusiastic about editing journals.

This training course is based on a course specifically for medical journal editors that has run for over 10 years and has now been adapted for editors working in any discipline. Participants came from social sciences, pure and applied sciences, and biomedical titles – which made for some interesting comparisons! During the two days we covered how to attract and keep good authors, how to ensure the journal is accessible to readers, and how to make strategic decisions to ensure the survival and success of a journal. The course included some presentations, but it focused on group work around examples and real-life situations which

required the participants to think on their feet.

The course was facilitated by Pippa Smart and Mike Jackson, who was the editor of *Annals of Botany* for many years and oversaw its transformation into the highly successful journal that it now is. Mike's extensive experience provided the participants with a wealth of information – and as he is launching a new journal, he was able to use them as a sounding board to test his ideas on!

The course was well received and participants scored it highly for content and presentation. Some of the notable comments received were: "1.5 days not long enough to do justice to the amount of material covered"; "excellent, interactive course"; "I learnt more about publishing practices than anticipated" and "I think my journal needs a younger editor!"

It is planned to make this an annual event, so watch the calendar for the next one.

**Pippa Smart**  
consultant, PSP Consulting  
pippa.smart@googlemail.com

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### COPE Seminar 2009

*London, 27 March 2009; Committee on Publication Ethics*

The first meeting of the Committee on Publication Ethics in 1997 was an informal gathering of editors who were a bit concerned about misconduct and ongoing shenanigans. Now in 2009 it is highly respected and has many publishers signed up, including Elsevier, Wiley-Blackwell, Springer, and Taylor and Francis, and over 5000 members, as well as a blog and a new newsletter. Harvey Marcovitch has stepped down as chairman and has been succeeded by Liz Wager.

Introducing the newsletter "Ethical Editing", its editor, Jeannie Wurz, highlighted its goals: engaging the members and informing them of ethical publishing. It will be an eight-page pdf, published quarterly.

#### **Mischief, malfeasance, and incompetence: the editor's enemies**

John Hoey started off by saying that it's funny to think that you can become famous for being sacked. John was the editor of *CMAJ* until in 2006 he was summarily dismissed. The journal and its owners were in a long running dispute about editorial decisions and editorial freedom.

John talked about the editor's contract and how explicit it should be. Make sure that the Helsinki declaration ([http://](http://www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm)

[www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm](http://www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm)) is in it, that the guidelines on WAME and the ICMJE are mentioned, and make sure what the publishers goals are, and that all editorial and publisher conflicts of interest are readily available or published.

Once the contract is signed, the editor is to commission articles and run everything through peer review, choosing relevant external reviewers, making editorial decisions, editing articles, etc. When looking at manuscripts there is a need to weigh up the reporting bias and the conflict of interest.

Conflicts of interest can be a bit of a minefield. Is disclosure enough? Should authors report who was responsible for what? Journals need good checklists that include the design, data collection, analysis, who wrote the article, etc. The Equator network covers a lot of this, and there are about 160 reporting guidelines, such as CONSORT and QUORUM.

The publisher and editor relationship should have a clear and explicit contract from the start, state that they follow the Helsinki Declaration and use the guidelines from WAME and ICMJE, be clear on the publisher's goals,

and also disclose any conflicts of interests. The goals of the author-editor relationship should consist of the high quality of articles, having up to date and good instructions for authors, using the reporting guidelines, and using submission checklists.

### **Editorial professionalism and ethical concerns in small journals**

Behrooz Astaneh, deputy editor of the Iranian Journal of Medical Sciences, said that small journals have the same ethical concerns as most journals, but they have a harder time finding the resources or money to pay for plagiarism tools, image manipulation tools and to counteract with authors and reviewers.

Small journals tend to have a low circulation, and some do not have editorial independence. The editorial board may not have followed the articles all the way through the peer review process, leading to inappropriate decisions.

Behrooz suggested having a good system to replace the author-editor contact and take the pressure off the editor, which reduces bias, and having a board of professional editors to decide which articles to accept or reject.

In journals that are from a non-English speaking countries, trained editors would learn better English and tackle the language barrier, which is sometimes causing the unethical misconduct.

Iran has more than 140 medical journals, many of which are being printed in English. Workshops were constructed for editors and medical journalists, boards and faculty members, to teach the basics of medical journalism, how to write, screening, peer review and critical appraisal, ethics, amongst some. They also founded an academic course in medical journalism, covering epidemiology, biostatistics, online production, and magazine production.

In the breakout workshop, four groups discussed two cases, one a potential conflict of interest and the other an authorship dispute. Everyone pretty much had the same ideas and people who were not sure are much wiser now; this worked very well and got people talking.

### **Editorial and publishing ethics: a non-bio(medical) point of view**

Randell Stephenson is editor in chief of the *Journal of Geodynamics*, a fairly small journal with 10 issues a year, no editorial office or editorial assistants just an EIC and an advisor (the ex-EIC) and about 20 board members.

Being an Elsevier journal it is new to COPE but does use the Elsevier PERK – Publishing Ethics Resource Kit which is linked with COPE structuring guidelines and policies and letter templates etc. PERK uses decision trees which consist of authorship complaints; plagiarism; multiple submission; research results misappropriation; research errors and fraud; research standards violations; undisclosed conflicts of interests; reviewer bias or competitive harmful acts by reviewers.

The reviewing policy is single blind peer review, with about 80% of reviewers wishing to remain anonymous. They get all the usual reviewer types: the four-minute review –

yeah, great paper publish it; the four-month review (very normal and very annoying); reviewer rage – this is where the reviewer has a pop at the author or feels very strongly about something and forgets the rule of critical appraisal; the refuse to review – and if you can't get a reviewer after many tries then the paper is probably not worth publishing. Having double blind peer review would make finding reviewers more difficult.

Randell summed up with a few pointers. There is no difference when it comes to ethics whether you are a small or large journal; ethics is not a luxury; there is less scope in this small journal for undisclosed conflicts of interest, as there is not much funding; the PERK decision tree is closely tied into the peer review process. Reviewer bias, both positive and negative is the main ethical issue affecting the *Journal of Geodynamics*; negative bias is heightened in a small community in an environment of reduced research funding.

### **Publication ethics in small journals**

Margaret Rees, editor in chief for *Maturitas*, gave an insight into how to deal with ethical issues facing a very small journal. She comes from a background of not having many staff on the journals she has been the editor of, just one editor, one typesetter/production editor and a printer, no backup of a big publisher, and all on a limited budget. She gets all the usual suspects, plagiarism, duplicate publication, etc, but finds it more difficult because of the lack of resources on a small journal.

Another problem is the detection of problems. Many times an editor walks into the EIC role and thinks “I can do this” but actually has no training or any idea about what publication ethics means. Sometimes if a journal has a small manuscript flow it is tempting to ignore some matters, and to deny there are matters arising. Some editors have been known to use bully tactics to get what they want. Lastly, the experience of reviewers and boards may be limited.

Retraction seems to be a grey area. When an investigation has shown that an article contains faked data or has been plagiarized, the journal tells the reader to ignore that article. But this is easier said than done – the article can go on being cited. If a journal is seen to be not very responsive to publication ethics then it could mean financial loss, circulation revenue and advertising revenue, etc.

Some preventive strategies can be put in place: you need to train your editors and make them vigilant, and have a clear and informed instructions for authors and keep them up to date. Maintain accurate documentation and be prepared to contact institutions if authors are non-compliant. For society journals, it is important for the journal to maintain its editorial independence; owners or societies should not interfere with the selection or editing of content or to be strongly influenced. All conflicts of interests should be established.

**Gary Bryan**  
Editorial Manager, BMJGroup  
gbryan@bmj.com