Ethical conduct of journal editors

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During the past decade, there has been increasing concern about scientific misconduct. Using the keyword “misconduct,” the number of articles retrieved on MEDLINE averaged 100 per year for the decade 1993–2002 compared with an average of 28 per year for the preceding decade. Guidelines for preventing and dealing with misconduct have been developed by many organizations, but only recently has the role of the medical journal come under scrutiny. Late last year, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) published a draft code of conduct for medical editors.1 The purpose of this editorial is to discuss the draft code and to describe how the editors of the Journal of Psychiatry & Neuroscience (JPN) are responding to the issues in it.

The first section of the draft code concerns “Accuracy and correcting the record” and begins as follows: “Editors should take all reasonable steps to ensure the accuracy of the material they publish.” There are 2 issues here. The first is the submission of data that have in some way been deliberately manipulated. In many cases, scientific fraud has not been detected until after an article is published, illustrating the difficulty of detecting fraud when those perpetrating the fraud fabricate plausible data. Scientific fraud is, fortunately, rare. The second issue, which is more common, is sloppy reporting by authors. This can often be detected during manuscript review by ensuring that there is internal consistency concerning procedures, group sizes, and so on. Paying attention to these details during the editorial process has helped to eliminate mistakes in a minority of papers published in JPN.

The second statement reads: “Peer review processes should be described, and editors should be ready to explain any important deviation from the described processes.” The review process at JPN was described in some detail recently,2 and there have not been any important deviations from this process. Any important deviation from the normal process of peer review would be explained in the journal, were it to occur.

The next 3 items, as follows, are concerned with correcting the record, when necessary: “Whenever it is recognised that a significant inaccuracy, misleading statement, or distorted report has been published, it must be corrected promptly and with due prominence. An apology must be published whenever appropriate. If articles prove to be fraudulent or contain major errors that are not apparent from the text then they should be retracted—and the word retraction should be used in the title of the retraction (to ensure that it is picked up by indexing systems).” The editors of JPN have never had to deal with these issues, but they would certainly follow these guidelines if such a situation did arise.

The last item under “Accuracy and correcting the record” states: “Cogent critical responses to published material should be published unless editors have convincing reasons why they cannot be. (Journals are advised to create electronic means of responding so that ‘lack of space’ is no longer a convincing reason for not publishing a response.)” JPN has always published
concerning critical responses to published material. So far, these have been printed in the journal to ensure that criticisms have similar visibility to the original article. Although the editors of JPN would not be averse to having online responses to articles, there were sufficient demands, this would remain under editorial control. Some journals, such as the British Medical Journal (BMJ) and the Canadian Medical Association Journal, post unedited responses online. The now-former editor of the BMJ has pointed out that “those who read our rapid responses will find strange beasts, contorted prose and rank nonsense,” but the BMJ continues to publish unedited responses because of a deep commitment to unfettered debate. While this is laudable, unfettered debate is probably more appropriate for a general medical journal than for a specialized research journal such as JPN. Therefore, JPN publishes only cogent critical responses.

The second and third sections of the draft code are short and are concerned with ethics. Under the heading “Ethics committee approval,” the guideline reads as follows: “Editors should ensure that research material they publish has been approved by an ethics committee. They should satisfy themselves that the research is ethical as they can be held responsible for publishing ‘unethical’ research even if it has been approved by an ethics committee.” This statement is simple and obvious, but implementing it is not always simple or obvious. An international journal such as JPN has to take into account international standards such as the World Medical Association’s Declaration of Helsinki as well as national guidelines or laws, or both. The Declaration of Helsinki deals more with general principles than details, and the details of what is ethically acceptable can vary from one country to another (e.g., the use of placebos). Ethical issues have led both to discussions among the Editorial Board and, occasionally, to fairly extensive correspondence with authors. The editors of JPN try to apply what they consider to be the broad international consensus on ethical issues. For the section on “Protecting the confidentiality of human subjects,” the guideline reads: “Editors must protect the confidentiality of information on patients obtained through the doctor–patient relationship. As ensuring anonymity is almost impossible this must usually be done through obtaining written consent for publication from patients.” JPN is committed to ensuring patient confidentiality whenever possible and to ensuring that consent is obtained when maintaining confidentiality is not possible.

The section headed “Pursuing misconduct” provides specific guidance: “Editors are often the first recipients of studies that may involve some element of misconduct. If editors encounter misconduct on the part of authors, their staff, or other editors then they have a duty to take action. If the misconduct is by authors or other editors then editors will need to ask their employers or some other appropriate body (perhaps a regulatory body) to investigate. The editors have a duty to ensure that a proper investigation is conducted, and if this doesn’t happen for whatever reason the editors must persist in obtaining a resolution to the problem and a correction of the record if it is needed. This is an onerous but important duty.” The editors of JPN are fortunate in never having had to pursue cases of misconduct but would certainly follow these guidelines if they had to do so.

The next section is titled “Relationship to publishers, owners, and the economics of journals” and states: “The relationship of editors to publishers and owners is often complex and should pay attention to the tradition of editorial independence. Editors clearly have to accept the economic realities of their journals, but decisions on which articles to publish should be based on grounds of quality and suitability for readers rather than for immediate financial gain.” The publisher of JPN is the Canadian Medical Association (CMA). The CMA gives the editors editorial independence, although there are obviously constraints related to costs. Nonetheless, the CMA puts resources into the objectives of the editors. A recent example is the inclusion of JPN in PubMed Central. The editors are not aware of the details of JPN finances. However, they have to remain aware of trends in important factors that impinge on the financial viability of the journal. These include the results of readership surveys, subscription sales and advertising revenue. Advertising revenue helps offset the publication costs of JPN, but the editors are unaware of which products are advertised in any issue until they see the published issue. In the long run, the financial viability of JPN will depend on its scientific excellence and reputation, and so it is easy for the editors to consider only scientific quality during the review of manuscripts.

The section on “Conflict of interest” is succinct: “Editors should have systems for managing the conflicts of interest of themselves, their staff, authors, and reviewers.” At JPN, conflict of interest is dealt with primarily by disclosure. The managing editor is responsible for obtaining statements concerning potential
conflicts of interest from the authors of all manuscripts (not just research papers) and from referees. The statements from authors are published with their articles. In addition, members of the Editorial Board (but not the Editorial Advisory Board) make financial disclosure statements that are kept on file. Editors do not handle manuscripts where there could be the perception of a conflict of interest.

The next section of the draft code is titled “Ways to complain.” It states: “Editors should respond promptly to all complaints and should ensure that there is a way for complainants who are dissatisfied with the response to take complaints further. Ideally this mechanism should be made clear in the journal.” The editors will certainly try to deal with all complaints promptly. Those who are dissatisfied with their response should take the matter up with the Editor-in-Chief of CMA publications, John Hoey, MD (john.hoey@cma.ca). Additional contact information can be obtained from the CMA Web site (www.cma.ca).

The last section is titled “Living by the code” and is mainly concerned with how COPE would respond to complaints. The editors of JPN certainly attempt to live by the spirit of the draft code, as discussed here. This is an area in which principle and expediency coincide. To succeed, a research journal must maintain credibility. This can be done best through ethical conduct and by informing the journal’s readership of the practices in place to ensure that ethical conduct is maintained.

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References