

Responsible research publication: international standards for editors

*A position statement developed at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity,
Singapore, July 22-24, 2010*

Sabine Kleinert & Elizabeth Wager

Contact details: sabine.kleinert@lancet.com
liz@sideview.demon.co.uk

Summary

- Editors are accountable and should take responsibility for everything they publish
- Editors should make fair and unbiased decisions independent from commercial consideration and ensure a fair and appropriate peer review process
- Editors should adopt editorial policies that encourage maximum transparency and complete, honest reporting
- Editors should guard the integrity of the published record by issuing corrections and retractions when needed and pursuing suspected or alleged research and publication misconduct
- Editors should pursue reviewer and editorial misconduct
- Editors should critically assess the ethical conduct of studies in humans and animals
- Peer reviewers and authors should be told what is expected of them
- Editors should have appropriate policies in place for handling editorial conflicts of interest

Cite this as:

Kleinert S & Wager E (2011) Responsible research publication: international standards for editors. A position statement developed at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity, Singapore, July 22-24, 2010. Chapter 51 in: Mayer T & Steneck N (eds) *Promoting Research Integrity in a Global Environment*. Imperial College Press / World Scientific Publishing, Singapore (pp 317-28). (ISBN 978-981-4340-97-7)

Introduction

As guardians and stewards of the research record, editors should encourage authors to strive for, and adhere themselves to, the highest standards of publication ethics. Furthermore, editors are in a unique position to indirectly foster responsible conduct of research through their policies and processes. To achieve the maximum effect within the research community, ideally all editors should adhere to universal standards and good practices. While there are important differences between different fields and not all areas covered are relevant to each research community, there are important common editorial policies, processes, and principles that editors should follow to ensure the integrity of the research record.

These guidelines are a starting point and are aimed at journal editors in particular. While books and monographs are important and relevant research records in many fields, guidelines for book editors are beyond the scope of these recommendations. It is hoped that in due course such guidelines can be added to this document.

Editors should regard themselves as part of the wider professional editorial community, keep themselves abreast of relevant policies and developments, and ensure their editorial staff is trained and kept informed of relevant issues.

To be a good editor requires many more principles than are covered here. These suggested principles, policies, and processes are particularly aimed at fostering research and publication integrity.

Editorial Principles

1. Accountability and responsibility for journal content

Editors have to take responsibility for everything they publish and should have procedures and policies in place to ensure the quality of the material they publish and maintain the integrity of the published record (see paragraphs 4-8).

2. Editorial independence and integrity

An important part of the responsibility to make fair and unbiased decisions is the upholding of the principle of editorial independence and integrity.

2.1 Separating decision-making from commercial considerations

Editors should make decisions on academic merit alone and take full responsibility for their decisions. Processes must be in place to separate commercial activities within a journal from editorial processes and decisions. Editors should take an active interest in the publisher's pricing policies and strive for wide and affordable accessibility of the material they publish.

Sponsored supplements must undergo the same rigorous quality control and peer review as any other content for the journal. Decisions on such material must be made

in the same way as any other journal content. The sponsorship and role of the sponsor must be clearly declared to readers.

Advertisements need to be checked so that they follow journal guidelines, should be clearly distinguishable from other content, and should not in any way be linked to scholarly content.

2.2 Editors' relationship to the journal publisher or owner

Editors should ideally have a written contract setting out the terms and conditions of their appointment with the journal publisher or owner. The principle of editorial independence should be clearly stated in this contract. Journal publishers and owners should not have any role in decisions on content for commercial or political reasons. Publishers should not dismiss an editor because of any journal content unless there was gross editorial misconduct or an independent investigation has concluded that the editor's decision to publish was against the journal's scholarly mission.

2.3 Journal metrics and decision-making

Editors should not attempt to inappropriately influence their journal's ranking by artificially increasing any journal metric. For example, it is inappropriate to demand that references to that journal's articles are included except for genuine scholarly reasons. In general, editors should ensure that papers are reviewed on purely scholarly grounds and that authors are not pressured to cite specific publications for non-scholarly reasons.

3. Editorial confidentiality

3.1 Authors' material

If a journal operates a system where peer reviewers are chosen by editors (rather than posting papers for all to comment as a pre-print version), editors must protect the confidentiality of authors' material and remind reviewers to do so as well. In general, editors should not share submitted papers with editors of other journals, unless with the authors' agreement or in cases of alleged misconduct (see below). Editors are generally under no obligation to provide material to lawyers for court cases. Editors should not give any indication of a paper's status with the journal to anyone other than the authors. Web-based submission systems must be run in a way that prevents unauthorised access.

In the case of a misconduct investigation, it may be necessary to disclose material to third parties (e.g., an institutional investigation committee or other editors).

3.2 Reviewers

Editors should protect reviewers' identities unless operating an open peer review system. However, if reviewers wish to disclose their names, this should be permitted.

If there is alleged or suspected reviewer misconduct it may be necessary to disclose a reviewer's name to a third party.

General editorial policies

4. Encourage maximum transparency and complete and honest reporting

To advance knowledge in scholarly fields, it is important to understand why particular work was done, how it was planned and conducted and by whom, and what it adds to current knowledge. To achieve this understanding, maximum transparency and complete and honest reporting are crucial.

4.1 Authorship and responsibility

Journals should have a clear policy on authorship that follows the standards within the relevant field. They should give guidance in their information for authors on what is expected of an author and, if there are different authorship conventions within a field, they should state which they adhere to.

For multidisciplinary and collaborative research, it should be apparent to readers who has done what and who takes responsibility for the conduct and validity of which aspect of the research. Each part of the work should have at least one author who takes responsibility for its validity. For example, individual contributions and responsibilities could be stated in a contributor section. All authors are expected to have contributed significantly to the paper and to be familiar with its entire content and ideally, this should be declared in an authorship statement submitted to the journal.

When there are undisputed changes in authorship for appropriate reasons, editors should require that all authors (including any whose names are being removed from an author list) agree these in writing. Authorship disputes (i.e., disagreements on who should or should not be an author before or after publication) cannot be adjudicated by editors and should be resolved at institutional level or through other appropriate independent bodies for both published and unpublished papers. Editors should then act on the findings, for example by correcting authorship in published papers.

Journals should have a publicly declared policy on how papers submitted by editors or editorial board members are handled (see paragraph on editorial conflicts of interest: 8.2).

4.2 Conflicts of interest and role of the funding source

Editors should have policies that require all authors to declare any relevant financial and non-financial conflicts of interest and publish at least those that might influence a reader's perception of a paper, alongside the paper. The funding source of the research should be declared and published, and the role of the funding source in the conception, conduct, analysis, and reporting of the research should be stated and published.

Editors should make it clear in their information for authors if in certain sections of the journal (e.g., commissioned commentaries or review articles) certain conflicts of interest preclude authorship.

4.3 Full and honest reporting and adherence to reporting guidelines

Among the most important responsibilities of editors is to maintain a high standard in the scholarly literature. Although standards differ among journals, editors should work to ensure that all published papers make a substantial new contribution to their field. Editors should discourage so-called ‘salami publications’ (i.e., publication of the minimum publishable unit of research), avoid duplicate or redundant publication unless it is fully declared and acceptable to all (e.g., publication in a different language with cross-referencing), and encourage authors to place their work in the context of previous work (i.e., to state why this work was necessary/done, what this work adds or why a replication of previous work was required, and what readers should take away from it).

Journals should adopt policies that encourage full and honest reporting, for example, by requiring authors in fields where it is standard to submit protocols or study plans, and, where they exist, to provide evidence of adherence to relevant reporting guidelines. Although devised to improve reporting, adherence to reporting guidelines also makes it easier for editors, reviewers, and readers to judge the actual conduct of the research.

Digital image files, figures, and tables should adhere to the appropriate standards in the field. Images should not be inappropriately altered from the original or present findings in a misleading way.

Editors might also consider screening for plagiarism, duplicate or redundant publication by using anti-plagiarism software, or for image manipulation. If plagiarism or fraudulent image manipulation is detected, this should be pursued with the authors and relevant institutions (see paragraph on how to handle misconduct: 5.2)

5. Responding to criticisms and concerns

Reaction and response to published research by other researchers is an important part of scholarly debate in most fields and should generally be encouraged. In some fields, journals can facilitate this debate by publishing readers’ responses. Criticisms may be part of a general scholarly debate but can also highlight transgressions of research or publication integrity.

5.1 Ensuring integrity of the published record - corrections

When genuine errors in published work are pointed out by readers, authors, or editors, which do not render the work invalid, a correction (or erratum) should be published as soon as possible. The online version of the paper may be corrected with a date of correction and a link to the printed erratum. If the error renders the work or substantial

parts of it invalid, the paper should be retracted with an explanation as to the reason for retraction (i.e., honest error).

5.2 Ensuring the integrity of the published record – suspected research or publication misconduct

If serious concerns are raised by readers, reviewers, or others, about the conduct, validity, or reporting of academic work, editors should initially contact the authors (ideally all authors) and allow them to respond to the concerns. If that response is unsatisfactory, editors should take this to the institutional level (see below). In rare cases, mostly in the biomedical field, when concerns are very serious and the published work is likely to influence clinical practice or public health, editors should consider informing readers about these concerns, for example by issuing an ‘expression of concern’, while the investigation is ongoing. Once an investigation is concluded, the appropriate action needs to be taken by editors with an accompanying comment that explains the findings of the investigation. Editors should also respond to findings from national research integrity organisations that indicate misconduct relating to a paper published in their journal. Editors can themselves decide to retract a paper if they are convinced that serious misconduct has happened even if an investigation by an institution or national body does not recommend it.

Editors should respond to all allegations or suspicions of research or publication misconduct raised by readers, reviewers, or other editors. Editors are often the first recipients of information about such concerns and should act, even in the case of a paper that has not been accepted or has already been rejected. Beyond the specific responsibility for their journal’s publications, editors have a collective responsibility for the research record and should act whenever they become aware of potential misconduct if at all possible. Cases of possible plagiarism or duplicate/redundant publication can be assessed by editors themselves. However, in most other cases, editors should request an investigation by the institution or other appropriate bodies (after seeking an explanation from the authors first and if that explanation is unsatisfactory).

Retracted papers should be retained online, and they should be prominently marked as a retraction in all online versions, including the PDF, for the benefit of future readers. For further guidance on specific allegations and suggested actions, such as retractions, see the COPE flowcharts and retraction guidelines

(<http://publicationethics.org/flowcharts>;

http://publicationethics.org/files/u661/Retractions_COPE_gline_final_3_Sept_09__2_.pdf).

5.3 Encourage scholarly debate

All journals should consider the best mechanism by which readers can discuss papers, voice criticisms, and add to the debate (in many fields this is done via a print or on-line correspondence section). Authors may contribute to the debate by being allowed to respond to comments and criticisms where relevant. Such scholarly debate about published work should happen in a timely manner. Editors should clearly distinguish

between criticisms of the limitations of a study and criticisms that raise the possibility of research misconduct. Any criticisms that raise the possibility of misconduct should not just be published but should be further investigated even if they are received a long time after publication.

Editorial policies relevant only to journals that publish research in humans or animals

6. Critically assess and require a high standard of ethical conduct of research

Especially in biomedical research but also in social sciences and humanities, ethical conduct of research is paramount in the protection of humans and animals. Ethical oversight, appropriate consent procedures, and adherence to relevant laws are required from authors. Editors need to be vigilant to concerns in this area.

6.1 Ethics approval and ethical conduct

Editors should generally require approval of a study by an ethics committee (or institutional review board) and the assurance that it was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki for medical research in humans but, in addition, should be alert to areas of concern in the ethical conduct of research. This may mean that a paper is sent to peer reviewers with particular expertise in this area, to the journal's ethics committee if there is one, or that editors require further reassurances or evidence from authors or their institutions.

Papers may be rejected on ethical grounds even if the research had ethics committee approval.

6.2 Consent (to take part in research)

If research is done in humans, editors should ensure that a statement on the consent procedure is included in the paper. In most cases, written informed consent is the required norm. If there is any concern about the consent procedure, if the research is done in vulnerable groups, or if there are doubts about the ethical conduct, editors should ask to see the consent form and enquire further from authors, exactly how consent was obtained.

6.3 Consent (for publication)

For all case reports, small case series, and images of people, editors should require the authors to have obtained explicit consent for publication (which is different from consent to take part in research). This consent should inform participants which journal the work will be published in, make it clear that, although all efforts will be made to remove unnecessary identifiers, complete anonymity is not possible, and ideally state that the person described has seen and agreed with the submitted paper.

The signed consent form should be kept with the patient file rather than sent to the journal (to maximise data protection and confidentiality, see paragraph 6.4). There may be exceptions where it is not possible to obtain consent, for example when the person has died. In such cases, a careful consideration about possible harm is needed and out of courtesy attempts should be made to obtain assent from relatives. In very rare cases, an important public health message may justify publication without consent if it is not possible despite all efforts to obtain consent and the benefit of publication outweighs the possible harm.

6.4 Data protection and confidentiality

Editors should critically assess any potential breaches of data protection and patient confidentiality. This includes requiring properly informed consent for the actual research presented, consent for publication where applicable (see paragraph 6.3), and having editorial policies that comply with guidelines on patient confidentiality.

6.5 Adherence to relevant laws and best practice guidelines for ethical conduct

Editors should require authors to adhere to relevant national and international laws and best practice guidelines where applicable, for example when undertaking animal research. Editors should encourage registration of clinical trials.

Editorial Processes

7. Ensuring a fair and appropriate peer review process

One of the most important responsibilities of editors is organising and using peer review fairly and wisely. Editors should explain their peer review processes in the information for authors and also indicate which parts of the journal are peer reviewed.

7.1 Decision whether to review

Editors may reject a paper without peer review when it is deemed unsuitable for the journal's readers or is of poor quality. This decision should be made in a fair and unbiased way. The criteria used to make this decision should be made explicit. The decision not to send a paper for peer review should only be based on the academic content of the paper, and should not be influenced by the nature of the authors or the host institution.

7.2 Interaction with peer reviewers

Editors should use appropriate peer reviewers for papers that are considered for publication by selecting people with sufficient expertise and avoiding those with conflicts of interest. Editors should ensure that reviews are received in a timely manner.

Peer reviewers should be told what is expected of them and should be informed about any changes in editorial policies. In particular, peer reviewers should be asked to assess research and publication ethics issues (i.e., whether they think the research was done and reported ethically, or if they have any suspicions of plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, or redundant publication). Editors should have a policy to request a formal conflict of interest declaration from peer reviewers and should ask peer reviewers to inform them about any such conflict of interest at the earliest opportunity so that they can make a decision on whether an unbiased review is possible. Certain conflicts of interest may disqualify a peer reviewer. Editors should stress confidentiality of the material to peer reviewers and should require peer reviewers to inform them when they ask a colleague for help with a review or if they mentor a more junior colleague in conducting peer review. Editors should ideally have a mechanism to monitor the quality and timeliness of peer review and to provide feedback to reviewers.

7.3 Reviewer misconduct

Editors must take reviewer misconduct seriously and pursue any allegation of breach of confidentiality, non-declaration of conflicts of interest (financial or non-financial), inappropriate use of confidential material, or delay of peer review for competitive advantage. Allegations of serious reviewer misconduct, such as plagiarism, should be taken to the institutional level (for further guidance see: http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/07_Reviewer_misconduct.pdf).

7.4 Interaction with authors

Editors should make it clear to authors what the role of the peer reviewer is because this may vary from journal to journal. Some editors regard peer reviewers as advisors and may not necessarily follow (or even ask for) reviewers' recommendations on acceptance or rejection. Correspondence from editors is usually with the corresponding author, who should guarantee to involve co-authors at all stages. Communicating with all authors at first submission and at final acceptance stage can be helpful to ensure all authors are aware of the submission and have approved the publication. Normally, editors should pass on all peer reviewers' comments in their entirety. However, in exceptional cases, it may be necessary to exclude parts of a review, if it, for example, contains libellous or offensive remarks. It is important, however, that such editorial discretion is not inappropriately used to suppress inconvenient comments.

There should always be good reasons, which are clearly communicated to authors, if additional reviewers are sought at a late stage in the process.

The final editorial decision and reasons for this should be clearly communicated to authors and reviewers. If a paper is rejected, editors should ideally have an appeals process. Editors, however, are not obliged to overturn their decision.

8. Editorial decision-making

Editors are in a powerful position by making decisions on publications, which makes it very important that this process is as fair and unbiased as possible, and is in accordance with the academic vision of the particular journal.

8.1 Editorial and journal processes

All editorial processes should be made clear in the information for authors. In particular, it should be stated what is expected of authors, which types of papers are published, and how papers are handled by the journal. All editors should be fully familiar with the journal policies, vision, and scope. The final responsibility for all decisions rests with the editor-in-chief.

8.2 Editorial conflicts of interest

Editors should not be involved in decisions about papers in which they have a conflict of interest, for example if they work or have worked in the same institution and collaborated with the authors, if they own stock in a particular company, or if they have a personal relationship with the authors. Journals should have a defined process for handling such papers. Journals should also have a process in place to handle papers submitted by editors or editorial board members to ensure unbiased and independent handling of such papers. This process should be stated in the information for authors. Editorial conflicts of interests should be declared, ideally publicly.