

## The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE): Objectives and achievements 1997–2012

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### ■ Points essentiels

#### Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) : objectifs et réalisations (1997–2012)

*Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) a été créé en 1997 par un petit groupe de rédacteurs médicaux britanniques comme un groupe collaboratif pour discuter les cas mettant en cause l'éthique.*

*COPE a plus de 7000 membres travaillant dans de nombreux domaines et de toutes les zones du monde. Les membres de COPE peuvent apporter des cas anonymisés lors d'un forum trimestriel où les autres membres proposent des conseils.*

*Les cas de COPE sont à la base des recommandations sous forme de diagrammes de flux, qui sont populaires et ont été traduits dans plusieurs langues.*

*COPE espère que ses membres suivent le Code de conduite et espère être informé lorsque des membres ne respectent pas ce Code.*

*Outre les plaintes contre des membres, COPE n'investigue pas les cas individuels, mais propose des conseils sur l'éthique des publications et encourage les bonnes pratiques parmi les rédacteurs de journaux et les maisons d'édition.*

*La plupart des recommandations de COPE sont accessibles gratuitement sur le site [www.publicationethics.org](http://www.publicationethics.org).*

### ■ Key points

Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) was founded in 1997 by a small number of UK medical editors as a self-help group to discuss troubling ethical cases.

COPE now has over 7000 members working in many disciplines from all parts of the world. COPE members may bring anonymised cases to a quarterly Forum where other members offer advice.

The COPE cases form the basis for guidance such as the flowcharts, which have proved popular and been translated into several languages.

COPE expects its members to follow its Code of Conduct and will hear complaints that members have broken this code.

Apart from complaints against members, COPE does not investigate individual cases but exists to provide advice on publication ethics and promote good practice among journal editors and publishers.

Most of COPE's guidance is freely available to the public at [www.publicationethics.org](http://www.publicationethics.org).

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## COPE's foundation

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) was founded in 1997 by a small group of medical editors in the UK [1]. The original aim was to provide editors with an opportunity to discuss difficult ethical cases arising at their journal, in confidence, with fellow editors. Now, over 7000 journal editors worldwide, and from all disciplines, belong to COPE and many more refer to its guidance. However, despite this rapid growth, the fundamental principles of COPE remain unchanged and its members still meet to discuss cases and provide informal advice on them to one another.

## COPE's role

COPE does not investigate individual cases of research or publication misconduct, it simply provides advice to editors and publishers based on the information that they supply. Mostly this happens at COPE Forum meetings. These are held every 3 months in London but, increasingly, the editors bringing cases are outside the UK and join the meeting by telephone rather than face-to-face. These Forum meetings (open to any COPE member) are surprisingly informal considering the seriousness of the cases they often discuss. There are usually about 30 editors and publishers in the room and they offer comments, usually based on their own experience of similar cases. No attempt is made to reach a consensus in every case, and sometimes the advice offered can be contradictory. Nevertheless, editors bringing cases virtually always say it has been helpful to discuss them. Cases are anonymised fully before they are presented, removing names of individuals or institutions and sometimes even details of the research being reported or the country where it was done to ensure that it cannot be identified [2]. This system of discussing anonymous cases has been used since COPE started.

## The growth of COPE

As COPE's membership grew, the organization needed to establish a more formal structure. A constitution was drafted in 2000 establishing the elected governing Council and officers, and COPE was registered as a UK charity in 2008. While COPE accepts only editors-in-chief or publishers of peer-reviewed journals as full members, individuals or companies with an interest in COPE's objects and who have demonstrated an interest in safeguarding the integrity of the research record (such as trainers or researchers) can become associate members.

COPE started with a handful of members in 1997. By 2000, membership had risen to 94 and there was steady growth in the next 5 years, reaching 277 members in 2006, mostly by individual journals joining. After this, COPE expanded rapidly when several major publishers signed up all their journals, so that by 2009 it had over 5000 members and by 2012 over 7000.

## Governance and funding

Despite its size, COPE has very few staff. Until 2009 it was run by a part-time administrator, then in 2009 a full-time Operations Manager was also recruited. Other activities such as the website and newsletter are handled by part-time contractors and everything else is done by volunteers. COPE is governed by an elected 18-person Council whose members also serve as trustees of the charity. COPE is funded solely from membership subscriptions which are generally paid by journal publishers. The annual fee depends on the journal size or frequency and starts at £ (GBP) 150 (about €180) for small journals or those that publish fewer than 12 issues per year. Subscription fees are reduced or waived for under-resourced journals such as those from developing countries.

## Developing guidelines

COPE has sometimes been called a 'self-help' group for journal editors and this is a good description of the way in which COPE guidelines have been developed. In the beginning, the members simply met and discussed their troublesome cases. One reason why they felt it was helpful to meet was that little or no published guidance was available to them. In some ways, COPE was based on the 'wisdom of crowds', i.e. the idea that a group of people is more likely to find the solution to a problem than somebody working alone. Because many of the cases involved allegations of serious misconduct, it was important that potentially defamatory details about individuals were not shared or published. Therefore, the system of discussing anonymised cases was developed.

The system of discussing and publishing only anonymised cases is quite different from that of initiatives such as Scientific Red Cards [3] which states that it aims to 'take inventory of scientific publications for which misconduct has been assessed' and the DeJaVu database of 'highly similar citations' [4,5]. By anonymising the cases, editors can feel comfortable about discussing them with their colleagues without disclosing confidential or sensitive information and the summaries supplied to COPE by editors can be published on the COPE website without concerns about defamation.

The COPE database now contains about 450 cases, searchable by keyword [2]. While such cases cannot be used to estimate the prevalence of misconduct, since editors probably bring only their more troubling cases to COPE, and it is impossible to calculate a denominator against which to measure a proportion or frequency, the database has been used to provide insights into the problems editors face [6,7].

## Code of conduct

The COPE cases not only provide a useful resource to editors who may be facing similar problems (and they are freely available on the COPE website, not only to members) but have

also been the basis for developing more formal guidance. The first set of guidelines was published in 1999 under the heading 'Good Publication Practice' [8]. These guidelines describe the purpose of COPE as 'to find practical ways of dealing with the issues, and to develop good practice' and represent COPE's first step in the latter activity. The 1999 guidelines reflect the biomedical journals that, at this time, predominated in COPE's membership, referring mainly to medical guidelines and including considerable detail about clinical research and use of human tissues. These guidelines were replaced by the Code of Conduct (for editors) in 2004. This was an important step in recognizing that membership of COPE, as well as bringing benefits and support, also carried responsibilities. All COPE member journals are expected to follow the Code of Conduct. In 2007, guidelines on Best Practice were written to accompany the Code of Conduct. These were developed in response to editors asking for guidance which went beyond the minimum standards expected of editors and covered emerging ethical issues. The Best Practice guidelines are described as 'aspirational' and 'voluntary' and, unlike the Code of Conduct, COPE does not require its members to implement or endorse them. In late 2010, the Code of Conduct was reviewed and comments were sought from COPE members, especially from editors outside the biomedical field. The aim of the review was not only to ensure the Code was up-to-date and reflected current thinking on good editorial practice, but also to ensure it was relevant to members across all disciplines. Following this consultation, a revised Code was published in 2011. This version combines the revised Code of Conduct for Editors with the Best Practice Guidelines into a single document [9]. The first COPE members were all journal editors, but when the constitution was drawn up in 2000, it extended membership to publishers. In recognition of this, in 2011, COPE produced a Code of Conduct for Publishers. Although COPE does not investigate individual cases of alleged or suspected misconduct, it does consider complaints that member journals have not followed the Code of Conduct (although the Best Practice Guidelines remain voluntary and cannot be the subject of such complaints). COPE's mechanism for handling such complaints is set out in a flowchart which was revised in 2012 [10]. COPE has an Ombudsman who is independent of the governing Council, who can hear complaints against COPE or arbitrate if members do not accept the findings in a complaint brought against them. In the past 3 years, two cases have been referred to the Ombudsman.

### Flowcharts

The next stage in codifying COPE's members' experience and providing guidance was the series of flowcharts which were first published in 2006. The idea of the flowcharts was to take the guidance from the Code of Conduct and the earlier Good

Publication Practice document, combined with advice from cases discussed at the Forum, and present this in a step-by-step and easily searchable fashion [11,12]. Each flowchart covers a different issue, such as what an editor should do if faced with suspected plagiarism in a published article. The flowcharts cover the issues most commonly raised in cases including: redundant publication, plagiarism, fabricated data, changes in authorship, undisclosed conflicts of interest, unethical research, and reviewer misconduct. They suggest practical steps an editor should take when faced with such issues in relation to either a published item or a submitted manuscript. The flowcharts have proved popular among editors and journal staff and have been translated (by COPE members on their own initiative) into Chinese, Croatian, Farsi, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. Most recently, they have been translated into French and these are available at [http://publicationethics.org/files/All\\_French\\_flowcharts.pdf](http://publicationethics.org/files/All_French_flowcharts.pdf). COPE has also commissioned translations into Italian and Arabic. Some or all of the flowcharts have also been published in various journals and posted on websites such as those of Elsevier and Wiley-Blackwell [13,14]. The International Society of Managing and Technical Editors describe the flowcharts as 'probably COPE's greatest resource and certainly its most practical' [15].

### Ethical audit

Another tool aimed at helping journals to follow COPE's Code of Conduct is the ethical audit which was produced in 2008 [16]. This is a 22-item list which members can use to check their processes against COPE's recommendations. The audit tool also includes links to relevant guidelines and articles from COPE and other organizations. Unlike the flowcharts, the audit tool is currently available only to COPE members. Since COPE does not require members to use it, or to share their results, it is hard to tell how widely the audit has been used. However, at least three publishers, to our knowledge, have audited all their journals (in one case using the COPE audit on around 300 journals). One of these publishers has instituted an audit cycle, using the tool initially to assess current practices and to provide feedback and guidance to all journals on items that were not up to standard, and repeating the exercise two years later to see how they had changed.

### COPE website

The COPE website ([www.publicationethics.org](http://www.publicationethics.org)) is an important resource for members and non-members alike and was established early in the life of COPE. In 2001, 2008 and 2010 it underwent major improvements and redesigns. The website receives 8000–10,000 hits and around 30,000 page views per month. Recognising that even a well-designed website can be difficult to navigate, in 2011, a COPE Council member developed a Short Guide to Ethical Editing for New Editors,

which includes links to various parts of the COPE website and to other relevant organizations [17].

### Newsletter and sample letters

In 2009, COPE launched a quarterly newsletter, *Ethical Editing*. This is sent to all members electronically but is also freely available to non-members [18]. Another resource that is freely available on the website are sample letters which editors can use, adapt or translate when they have to contact authors or reviewers about suspected misconduct [19]. These are another example of COPE sharing good practice among its members and providing practical tools to support editors faced with possible misconduct. Since, thankfully, cases of serious misconduct are relatively rare, an individual editor, in the course of his or her appointment, will generally not have the opportunity to develop experience in handling them or to learn from earlier cases. While publishers provide an important resource and can often provide helpful advice to editors, the sample letters are a good example of COPE using its members' collective experience to help others facing similar problems.

### Guidance on specific topics

While the Code of Conduct and Best Practice guidelines set out general principles for editors to follow, COPE has also produced more detailed guidance on some specific topics. One of the most influential of such documents is the guidance on retractions published in 2009 [20]. This was reproduced in five COPE member journals and has received at least 15 citations. COPE decided to produce this guidance because we had evidence that retractions were not being handled consistently [21,22] yet we felt there was broad consensus about good practice so it was possible to produce recommendations that reflected the views of a majority of editors and publishers across all disciplines.

However, for other topics, and especially fast-moving areas affected by new technologies, we recognise that consensus may not yet exist. Therefore, for the first time in 2011, COPE produced a discussion paper, rather than guidelines, on editors' responses to plagiarism [24]. While plagiarism has been a concern for centuries, the arrival of text-matching software which allows journals to compare submissions with other publications brings opportunities and challenges for editors and publishers. The discussion paper sets out the various options and discusses the effects that technology may have on definitions of, and attitudes towards, plagiarism.

### Working with institutions

The COPE Code of Conduct emphasizes that editors have a duty to act in cases of suspected or alleged misconduct [9]. However, COPE does not expect editors to investigate such cases themselves but considers this should be the responsibility of the author's institution or employer. Journal editors are neither trained nor resourced to undertake research misconduct

investigations and do not have the legal standing to discipline researchers, therefore they are not in a position to conduct investigations into allegations of misconduct. COPE therefore expects editors to liaise with institutions on individual cases. Unfortunately, institutions are not always willing to cooperate and the COPE database includes several cases where editors have had problems with this [7]. There is also evidence that editors do not always respond appropriately to requests from institutions [22]. In response to such evidence of difficulties, COPE has produced guidance about cooperation between research institutions and journals on misconduct cases [23].

### Research

While it has been possible to establish what constitutes best practice for journals in a number of important areas, and in general terms, other areas are more controversial. When new technologies, issues or challenges arise, there will often be a range of responses across different disciplines or publishers, and disagreement about best practice. There may also be uncertainty regarding the nature or frequency of the problem. In recognition of this, COPE promotes research into publication ethics among its members by offering research grants twice a year. Since they were set up in 2008, these grants (of up to £5000) have funded projects on retractions (which formed the basis for COPE's retraction guidelines), authorship, use of reporting guidelines, plagiarism and errata [25]. At the Asia-Pacific seminar in 2011, posters were invited and proved successful, so this initiative was repeated at the 2012 European seminar.

### Distance learning

In 2011, COPE launched the first four modules of an eLearning package on publication ethics [26]. These cover an introduction to publication ethics, plagiarism, falsification, and fabrication. Further modules covering topics such as conflicts of interest, authorship, redundant publication, and reviewer misconduct are planned. The package is designed to give editors a deeper understanding about publication ethics and practical guidance about how to detect, prevent, and handle various types of misconduct. At present, this resource is available only to COPE members, but anybody working for a COPE member journal is welcome to use it. We imagine this resource may be of particular benefit to newly appointed editors, members of editorial boards and journal staff. The eLearning draws heavily on the COPE flowcharts and uses cases from the database to provide examples. We decided to develop this material in the form of 'distance learning' so that it could be accessible to our members throughout the world and also so that they could refer to it when they needed it. Each module can be studied individually and in any order, as we recognise that some editors might prefer information on a specific topic rather than a complete course. It is too early to tell what impact the eLearn-

ing has had (it was launched in late October 2011), but initial feedback has been positive.

## External links

COPE has always worked closely with organizations in related fields. It has good contacts with the Council of Science Editors, European Association of Science Editors, World Association of Medical Editors and the International Society of Technical and Managing Editors. It views its work as complementary to these rather than competing with them. Wherever possible, COPE guidelines refer to relevant documents from other organizations. One challenge COPE has faced has been identifying guidelines on publication ethics developed outside the field of biomedicine. One of the aims of revising the Code of Conduct for editors in 2010 was to ensure it was relevant to all our members and to ensure it cited a wide range of source documents, not just those related to biomedical publishing. Yet, despite consulting with a wide range of editors, we find that there is often a lack of guidance from other disciplines.

## Becoming international and multidisciplinary

Starting as a largely UK organization, but growing into a global one has also presented challenges. The governing body of COPE now includes elected members from Australia, Belgium, China, Iran, Norway, the UK and the USA working in the fields of medicine, nursing, biology, geology, mathematics, media studies, and literature.

However, our experience is that journal editors around the world and across different disciplines face largely the same ethical issues. While medical research raises particular issues, such as the need for patient consent and the use of personal information, these are not unique to medicine but may arise in any discipline requiring human involvement in research such as psychology, education, and the social sciences. We also find that many problems, for example plagiarism and data fabrication, and the solutions to them, are identical wherever they occur.

The growing recognition that there are many universal values in research and publication ethics was a major impetus in developing the International Standards for editors and authors [27] which COPE coordinated at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity in Singapore in 2010. These documents aim to define responsible research publication, building on and providing more detail than the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity which was developed at the same meeting [28]. While the standards for editors are designed to complement the COPE Code of Conduct, the standards for authors represent the first

time that COPE has directly addressed this group. It is hoped that journal editors will adopt the statements and incorporate them into their own editorial policies and instructions for authors.

Now that COPE has produced guidance for editors, publishers, and authors, we realised that guidelines for peer reviewers might also be useful and these are currently being developed (due in late 2012).

COPE's first function was to provide an opportunity for journal editors to meet and discuss cases. As well as the regular Forum meetings, COPE runs seminars for its members with invited speakers addressing topical issues. The seminars started with an annual meeting in the UK, to which was added an annual US seminar in 2009. In 2011, COPE held its first Asia-Pacific seminar in Australia and also co-hosted a meeting in Iran. With our 7000 members scattered throughout the world, we realise it is not possible for most of them to meet face-to-face. However, while we have started to use the website and new media such as podcasts and videos to reach our members, we recognise that being an academic editor can sometimes be a lonely role, largely working in isolation, and that our members appreciate the chance to meet. We also hold an annual meeting for our publisher members and feedback from this meeting suggests that publishers (as well as editors) appreciate the chance to meet and talk about ethical issues. COPE also uses social media including Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn to communicate with members and others with an interest in publication ethics. COPE currently has over 900 followers on Twitter and over 300 'fans' on Facebook.

## Conclusions and looking forward

When COPE applied to become a registered charity (in 2008), it was required to state its objective and chose 'to educate and advance knowledge in methods of safeguarding the integrity of the scholarly record for the benefit of the public'. COPE has always been primarily an advisory body, and, as such, it is not easy to measure its success directly. However, the rapid growth in membership and the willingness of major publishers to pay for their journals to belong to COPE suggests that it is valued. We hope that COPE advice on specific cases and more general guidance helps editors and publishers do the right thing when faced with ethical issues. We also hope that the presence of COPE raises awareness about publication ethics and encourages journal editors and publishers to consider the ethical implications of their policies and practices.

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