# CHEST®

Official publication of the American College of Chest Physicians

## The Committee on Publication Ethics Flowcharts

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services can be found online on the World Wide Web at:
http://chestjournal.chestpubs.org/content/137/1/221.full.html

AMERICAN COLLEGE OF
CHEST
PHYSICIANS®

# The Committee on Publication Ethics Flowcharts

*Elizabeth Wager*

## WHAT IS THE COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATION ETHICS?

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) aims to increase the integrity of academic journals by advising editors on publication ethics. It was set up by a small group of editors from some of the United Kingdom's leading medical journals, but now has more than 5,000 members worldwide across a wide range of disciplines embracing the sciences and humanities.

COPE's primary means of offering advice to its members is via the quarterly COPE Forum meetings, where troubling cases may be presented, either in person or by telephone. The meetings and discussions are informal; it is not uncommon for members to express differing opinions, and there is no attempt to reach a consensus or to vote on suggested courses of action. Forum meetings simply give members an opportunity to discuss difficult cases (made suitably anonymous so that individuals' identities are not disclosed) with a peer group of fellow editors. In many cases, guidance is offered by editors who have experienced similar problems themselves or by reference to earlier COPE cases. Minutes are taken, and the cases are later posted on the COPE Web site. Members are not duty bound to follow COPE's advice, but they mostly do. The COPE administrator follows up all cases to report the outcome to the forum and in the cases database.

Since its foundation in 1997, COPE has received a steady stream of cases from editors. All cases (and their outcomes, if reported) are documented and posted on the Web site to form a searchable database. As the database has grown over the years, patterns and themes have emerged so that although each meeting is an informal gathering (usually of around 40 members) that may offer a range of opinions about the best course of action, when many cases are considered together, a broad consensus emerges. COPE has therefore developed a Code of Conduct for editors and best-practice guidelines.

## WHAT ARE THE COPE FLOWCHARTS?

The first COPE flowcharts were created in 2006 to capture the collected wisdom of the COPE Forum meetings and to provide a resource for editors beyond the London-based meetings, and also to nonmembers. They cover the topics most commonly presented at COPE Forum meetings and offer advice in a similar, informal way, which editors may choose to follow if they wish.

I wrote the first drafts one weekend in August 2006 when it was so wet and cold that I was glad to sit indoors at my computer. COPE's governing council made suggestions to improve the drafts, one of our member publishers (Blackwell, now Wiley-Blackwell) generously provided the services of a graphic designer, and then the flowcharts were ready to post on our Web site.[1]

The first 14 flowcharts covered topics that were most often presented at COPE Forum meetings, such as redundant publication, plagiarism, fabricated data, undisclosed competing interests, and unethical research. Since then, we have developed flowcharts on authorship problems and reviewer misconduct.

The flowcharts are aimed at journal editors and are therefore written from their viewpoint rather than from the perspective of authors, reviewers, or readers. However, the information may be of interest to people in these latter groups who want to know how journals might, or perhaps should, handle such issues.

The flowcharts do not provide precise definitions of types of misconduct, such as plagiarism or redundant publication, but leave it up to editors to determine what constitutes unacceptable behavior in a particular

**Affiliations:** Ms Wager is a freelance writer, trainer, and consultant and the current chair of COPE.
**Correspondence to:** Elizabeth Wager, Sideview, Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire, HP27 9DE, UK; e-mail: liz@sideview.demon.co.uk

case. The flowcharts have headings such as "what to do if you suspect plagiarism" or "what to do if you suspect redundant publication." This reflects the fact that many behaviors constitute spectra that alter very gradually from acceptable to unacceptable, and also that editors need to consider the context and motive for behaviors when deciding how to respond.

For example, authors writing for *CHEST* are not considered plagiarists because they use the phrase "chronic obstructive pulmonary disease" without referencing the first writer to coin it. Indeed, language only evolves because authors copy phrases from each other. If a nonnative English author copies a whole sentence from another group's paper and uses this in the introduction before presenting original findings, this may not be spotted and, even if it is, will probably result only in a polite request to reference the source or to paraphrase the appropriated sentence. However, if an experienced, English-speaking author copies a whole paragraph from another person's publication and uses it in a review article as if she or he had written it, this action would be criticized if the copying were detected. If a scientist retypes an entire published paper, puts his own name on it, and submits it to a journal as if it were his own work, then this would undoubtedly be viewed as plagiarism. But what about the shades of gray between? COPE leaves it to editors to decide when misconduct has occurred and what response is appropriate. For this reason, although the flowcharts aim to be clear and unambiguous, they sometimes recommend that editors should "consider" a particular course of action (such as contacting an author's institution) since the appropriateness of this action may depend on the severity of the offense and on the context of the behavior.

### Principles Underlying the Flowcharts

In its Code of Conduct, COPE reminds journal editors of their duty to pursue cases of suspected misconduct but emphasizes that, in nearly all cases, editors should not attempt to conduct investigations themselves. One reason why editors value COPE and the opportunity to discuss anonymous cases is that instances of misconduct frequently start with vague suspicions or allegations, and it is often not clear how an editor should respond. In the early stages, editors usually have only a partial account of events and only incomplete information about a case. In addition, because editors are usually not based at the authors' institution and have not been involved with the research or publication being disputed, they are not in a position to reach a judgment or to arbitrate. For example, if a researcher claims that she has been unjustly omitted from the list of authors, while the other authors claim that she did not contribute to the project suffi-

ciently to qualify for authorship, the editor has no way of deciding where the truth lies. One important principle of the flowcharts is therefore that editors should not judge cases themselves but should work with the appropriate authorities, for example, the authors' institutions, research funders, or an organization such as the US Office of Research Integrity, which is properly constituted to handle such cases and can obtain the necessary information.

The only exception to the principle that editors should not judge cases is when reviewers are suspected of appropriating authors' ideas, text, or data during the review process. In this case, it may be appropriate for the editor to conduct an investigation since the reviewer's offense occurred as a direct result of reviewing for the journal, rather than in the course of the reviewer's employment or a funded research project. Also, in such cases, the journal should have records of what was sent to the reviewer and when, enabling the editor to determine whether misconduct has occurred.

Unfortunately, in COPE's experience, employers, funders, and academic institutions are often unresponsive to editors' requests to investigate suspected misconduct.[2] A survey of COPE cases from 1998 to 2003 found that 20% remained unresolved.[3] In such cases, editors may issue an "Expression of Concern" to alert readers and other editors about their suspicions.

The flowcharts recognize that authors and institutions may not be minded to cooperate with editors' requests for information or investigation. Authors and reviewers have no contractual obligations to journals, so editors often need to be persistent and persuasive. A single, e-mailed request may have no effect, and it may be difficult to identify the appropriate person to contact in an institution or funder.

A second important principle, even when editors are not expected to investigate cases themselves, is to ensure that all sides in a dispute are represented and given an opportunity to explain their actions. Allegations of misconduct may be malicious (although in COPE's experience this is rare), and suspicions may be based on misunderstandings, misconceptions, or genuine differences in belief about what constitutes acceptable behavior. Therefore, many of the flowcharts include a stage of fact-finding when all parties are given an opportunity to present their side of the story. This is important because even suggesting that an institution should investigate a researcher's conduct can have serious consequences for the person who is investigated. COPE therefore does not insist that editors should always alert the institution if they suspect misconduct.

Since editors may come across ethical issues in both submitted and published works, there are separate flowcharts (and separate recommendations) for these different circumstances. A previous chair

of COPE, Fiona Godlee has noted that "Instead of simply rejecting a suspect paper, editors …have a duty to pursue that allegation."[4] The flowcharts therefore emphasize editors' duty to pursue cases of suspected misconduct in material submitted for publication, even if the journal has no intention of publishing the work, as well as the more obvious duty to correct the record if their journal has published seriously flawed work (eg, fabricated data) and to issue statements about publication misconduct such as inappropriate authorship, plagiarism, or redundant publication.

Since prevention is better than cure, the flowcharts also incorporate suggestions on how journals can avoid problems, for example, by providing clear information about authorship criteria, requiring contributors to describe their roles, and informing all authors of publication decisions (which can prevent individuals from being listed as authors unknowingly).

## Response to the Flowcharts

The response to the flowcharts has been extremely positive. Both editors and publishers have adopted them and encourage their use. Wiley-Blackwell has incorporated the flowcharts into their best-practice document and disseminated this to all their 1,400 journals.[5] Elsevier includes links to the flowcharts in its online Publishing Ethics Resource Kit.[6]

COPE members and supporters have translated some or all of the flowcharts into Croatian, Chinese, Farsi, Korean, Spanish, and Turkish. Thanks to M. Toyota and J. P. Barron, they are now available in Japanese (at http://www.ronbun.jp). Arabic, French, and Italian translations are being developed. COPE welcomes offers to translate the flowcharts and will organize a back-translation to ensure the consistency of the different versions.

The flowcharts are freely available to both members and nonmembers on the COPE Web site (http://www.publicationethics.org). COPE is happy for other organizations to link to the flowcharts from their own Web sites and will grant permission for the flowcharts to be reproduced so long as the source is acknowledged.

One measure of the success of the flowcharts has been COPE's visibility on search engines such as Google. Before the flowcharts, if you typed COPE into a search engine, the Committee on Publication Ethics was rarely featured on the first page of search results. After the flowcharts were included, COPE started to be the first item retrieved, thanks to links from other Web sites.

## Do We Need More Flowcharts?

As new trends emerge from the cases considered by COPE, or perhaps new forms of misconduct come to light (such as the use of software to manipulate research images), we plan to issue new flowcharts to meet editors' needs. We welcome suggestions for new topics, but please bear in mind that the flowcharts aim to assist editors of peer-reviewed scholarly journals and were not developed as a general teaching resource on publication or research ethics. However, COPE is currently planning a more extensive distance-learning program, which will undoubtedly incorporate the flowcharts and also make use of its database, which now contains over 350 cases.

COPE has always thrived on debate and discussion, and we realize that attitudes may change over time (perhaps as publication and research integrity standards increase) and new solutions may emerge (such as software to detect plagiarism or image manipulation), so the flowcharts may need to be revised. We therefore welcome suggestions for corrections or improvements.

## Take-Home Message

The COPE flowcharts are designed to help journal editors deal with a range of ethical issues, ranging from changes in authorship to suspicions of plagiarism. Authors may find them helpful for understanding how editors might react to such situations. The flowcharts are available at http://www.publicationethics.org.

## References

1. Flowcharts. http://www.publicationethics.org/flowcharts. Accessed April 2, 2009.
2. White C. Suspected research fraud: difficulties of getting at the truth. B*MJ*. 2005;331(7511):281-288.
3. Wager E. What do journal editors do when they suspect research misconduct? *Med Law*. 2007;26(3):535-544.
4. Godlee F. COPE annual report. http://publicationethics.org/annualreport/2005/3. Accessed April 2, 2009.
5. Graf C, Wager E, Bowman A, Fiack S, Scott-Lichter D, Robinson A. Blackwell Publishing guidelines on publication ethics. *Int J Clin Pract*. 2006;61(s152):1-26.
6. Elsevier. Publishing ethics resource kit (PERK). http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/editorshome.editors/Introduction. Accessed April 2, 2009.

**This information is current as of May 24, 2011**

**Updated Information & Services**
Updated Information and services can be found at:
http://chestjournal.chestpubs.org/content/137/1/221.full.html

**References**
This article cites 3 articles, 1 of which can be accessed free at:
http://chestjournal.chestpubs.org/content/137/1/221.full.html#ref-list-1

**Permissions & Licensing**
Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be
found online at:
http://www.chestpubs.org/site/misc/reprints.xhtml

**Reprints**
Information about ordering reprints can be found online:
http://www.chestpubs.org/site/misc/reprints.xhtml

**Citation Alerts**
Receive free e-mail alerts when new articles cite this article. To sign up, select the
"Services" link to the right of the online article.

**Images in PowerPoint format**
Figures that appear in *CHEST* articles can be downloaded for teaching purposes in
PowerPoint slide format. See any online figure for directions.