

Editorial

Ethical issues in medical journalism

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The knowledge of medical sciences is expanding at an astounding rate and biomedical journals play a vital role in its dissemination and advancement. The term biomedical journalism encompasses the areas of medicine, health policy, pharmaceuticals, communication, marketing, and electronic media. The target readership may include other researchers, health professionals or lay public; however, it is the former group for whom the medical journalism serves as the major mean of communication and learning. Thousands of journals are published world over and in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMRO) alone, over 400 medical journals are published in 23 member countries.¹ The reputation of any medical journal depends on the trust of readers, authors, researchers, reviewers, editors, funding agencies, and administrators of public health policy; nonetheless, the editors and editorial boards share the major responsibility.

The process of scientific publication is based on the presumption of honest and fair endeavor.² Editors and reviewers assume that authors have honestly submitted the methodology, results and interpretation of their research work. Similarly, authors, in turn, assume that their submission will

receive an unbiased assessment by reviewers and an equitable and fair editorial decision by editors. All participants involved in the process of scientific publication are expected to observe certain ethical standards.

Many organizations like World Association of Medical Editors (WAME),² the Association of Health Care Journalists (AHCJ),³ Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)⁴ have enlisted codes of ethics to be practiced by its members. Similarly, the WHO EMRO, since 2003, has been holding periodical meetings of medical editors in order to promote medical journalism in the region. Besides many other problems, ethical issues in medical journalism were also identified to be prevalent in EMRO countries. In harmony with the global practice, the Editorial Board of *the Journal of Pakistan Association of Dermatologists* vows to promote ethical practices in medical journalism and the present write-up aims to familiarize its authors and would-be authors with ethical issues in medical journalism.

Whenever authors submit a manuscript to any journal, it is assumed that their work is original and they have stated honestly what was done to address their research question, what was found and how the findings were interpreted. In their own place, they expect their submission to receive a fair and

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unbiased assessment by the reviewers and the editor.²

Peer review is fundamental to the scientific publication process. Peer reviewers are experts in the scientific field addressed in the article; however, they should not have a competing interest in the subject of article. They are expected to comment on the major strengths and weaknesses of the study design, methodology and author's interpretation of the data. They can also give useful and constructive professional suggestions to improve the manuscript.²

The primary responsibility of the editor is to protect and strengthen the integrity and quality of the journal. The process of evaluation, selection or editing of individual articles should be based on their importance, originality, clarity and relevance to the scope of the journal and it should not be influenced by the owners. Studies with negative results or those challenging previously published work should receive equal consideration.

During the process of publication, misconduct can arise regarding authors, reviewers, editors and others. Deception may be deliberate or by ignorance; nevertheless unintentional error is not considered as misconduct. Some common forms of such scientific misconduct are described herein.^{2,5,6,7}

- *Falsification of data* ranges from fabrication to deceptive selective reporting of findings and omission of conflicting data, or willful suppression and/or distortion of data.

- *Duplicate publication* also known as *redundant publication*, *shotgunning*, refers to the simultaneous, or not too greatly separated in time, publication in two or more scientific journals of seemingly identical or closely related articles of similar content. Nonetheless, republication of a paper in another language or simultaneously in multiple journals with different readership may be acceptable, provided that there is full disclosure of its original source at the time of submission of the manuscript. Authors should disclose details of related papers they have authored, even if in a different language, similar papers in press, and any closely related papers previously published or currently under review by another journal.

- *Salami slicing* implies dividing data gathered from a research project into as many papers as possible in order to maximize the number of potential publications. It is considered a lesser breach in ethical standards.

- *Plagiarism* is the use of the language, ideas, or thoughts of another without crediting their true source, and their representation as one's own original work. This applies whether words are taken from abstracts, grant application, Institutional Review Board applications, unpublished or unpublished data in print or electronic publication.

- *Improprieties of authorship* Improper assignment of credit, such as excluding others, misrepresentation of the same material as original in more than one publication, inclusion of individuals as

authors who have not made a definite contribution to the work published; or submission of multi-authored publications without the concurrence of all authors. The Uniform Requirements state that named authors should have made a substantial contribution to: (1) study conception and design, or data acquisition, or data analysis and interpretation; (2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors must fulfil all three criteria and everyone who meets the criteria should be listed. Named authors should also be prepared to take public responsibility for at least one aspect of the research. Medical writers should not agree to be listed as authors on publications if they do not fulfil the authorship criteria of the target journal.

Many papers, funded by pharmaceutical companies, are drafted not by the named authors but by professional medical writers working under the direction of those authors. Such authors are called ghost authors. The names of such authors should be mentioned in the acknowledgements.

- *Misappropriation of the ideas of others* An important aspect of scholarly activity is the exchange of ideas among colleagues. Scholars can acquire novel ideas from others during the process of reviewing grant applications and manuscripts. However, improper use of such information can constitute fraud. Wholesale appropriation of such material constitutes misconduct.

- *Violation of generally accepted research practices* Serious deviation from accepted practices in proposing or carrying out research, improper manipulation of experiments to obtain biased results, deceptive statistical or analytical manipulations, or improper reporting of results.
- *Material failure to comply with legislative and regulatory requirements affecting research* including but not limited to serious or substantial, repeated, willful violations of applicable local regulations and law involving the use of funds, care of animals, human subjects, investigational drugs, recombinant products, new devices, or radioactive, biologic, or chemical materials.
- *Inappropriate behavior in relation to misconduct* It includes unfounded or knowingly false accusations of misconduct, failure to report known or suspected misconduct, withholding or destruction of information relevant to a claim of misconduct and retaliation against persons involved in the allegation or investigation.

Such unethical behaviours are disliked and discouraged in the scientific community. Question arises what should be done in case of such an ethical misconduct. Journals do not have the authority to conduct a formal judicial inquiry and reach the formal conclusion in such situations. However, being the custodian of public scientific record, they should refer such cases to the individual's employer, university, granting agency, or regulatory body.

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Manuscript Submission

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