

Committee on Publications Ethics (COPE)

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CODE OF CONDUCT AND BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR JOURNAL EDITORS

Note: This document combines the original COPE Guidelines from 1999, the Code of Conduct developed in 2003, and the Best Practice Guidelines developed in 2007. This revision was developed after wide consultation with COPE members and approved by the COPE Council on 7th March 2011.

Background/structure

The COPE Code of Conduct for Journal Editors is designed to provide a set of minimum standards to which all COPE members are expected to adhere. The Best Practice Guidelines are more aspirational and were developed in response to requests from editors for guidance about a wide range of increasingly complex ethical issues. While COPE expects all members to adhere to the Code of Conduct for Journal Editors (and will consider complaints against members who have not followed it), we realise that editors may not be able to implement all the Best Practice recommendations (which are therefore voluntary), but we hope that our suggestions will identify aspects of journal policy and practice that should be reviewed and discussed.

In this combined version of the documents, the mandatory Code of Conduct for Journal Editors standards are shown in regular script and with numbered clauses, and the more aspirational Best Practice recommendations are shown in *italics*.

1. General duties and responsibilities of editors

- 1.1. Editors should be accountable for everything published in their journals

This means the editors should

- 1.2. *strive to meet the needs of readers and authors;*
- 1.3. *strive to constantly improve their journal;*
- 1.4. *have processes in place to assure the quality of the material they publish;*
- 1.5. *champion freedom of expression;*
- 1.6. *maintain the integrity of the academic record;*
- 1.7. *preclude business needs from compromising intellectual and ethical standards;*
- 1.8. *always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions and apologies when needed.*

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Best practice for editors would include

- *actively seeking the views of authors, readers, reviewers and editorial board members about ways of improving their journal's processes*
- *encouraging and being aware of research into peer review and publishing and reassessing their journal's processes in the light of new findings*
- *working to persuade their publisher to provide appropriate resources, guidance from experts (e.g. designers, lawyers)*
- *supporting initiatives designed to reduce research and publication misconduct*
- *supporting initiatives to educate researchers about publication ethics*
- *assessing the effects of their journal policies on author and reviewer behaviour and revising policies, as required, to encourage responsible behaviour and discourage misconduct*
- *ensuring that any press releases issued by their journal reflect the message of the reported article and put it into context*

2. Relations with readers

- 2.1. Readers should be informed about who has funded research or other scholarly work and whether the funders had any role in the research and its publication and, if so, what this was.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *ensuring that all published reports and reviews of research have been reviewed by suitably qualified reviewers (including statistical review where appropriate)*
- *ensuring that non-peer-reviewed sections of their journal are clearly identified*
- *adopting processes that encourage accuracy, completeness and clarity of research reporting including technical*
- *editing and the use of appropriate guidelines and checklists (e.g. MIAME,¹ CONSORT²)*
- *considering developing a transparency policy to encourage maximum disclosure about the provenance of non-research articles³*
- *adopting authorship or contributorship systems that promote good practice (i.e. so that listings accurately reflect who did the work)⁴ and discourage misconduct (e.g. ghost and guest authors)*
- *informing readers about steps taken to ensure that submissions from members of the journal's staff or editorial board receive an objective and unbiased evaluation*

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3. Relations with authors

- 3.1. Editors' decisions to accept or reject a paper for publication should be based on the paper's importance, originality and clarity, and the study's validity and its relevance to the remit of the journal.
- 3.2. Editors should not reverse decisions to accept submissions unless serious problems are identified with the submission.
- 3.3. New editors should not overturn decisions to publish submissions made by the previous editor unless serious problems are identified.
- 3.4. A description of peer review processes should be published, and editors should be ready to justify any important deviation from the described processes.
- 3.5. Journals should have a declared mechanism for authors to appeal against editorial decisions.
- 3.6. Editors should publish guidance to authors on everything that is expected of them. This guidance should be regularly updated and should refer or link to this code.
- 3.7. Editors should provide guidance about criteria for authorship and/or who should be listed as a contributor following the standards within the relevant field.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *reviewing author instructions regularly and providing links to relevant guidelines (e.g. ICMJE⁵, Responsible research publication: international standards for authors⁶)*
- *publishing relevant competing interests for all contributors and publishing corrections if competing interests are revealed after publication*
- *ensuring that appropriate reviewers are selected for submissions (i.e. individuals who are able to judge the work and are free from disqualifying competing interests)*
- *respecting requests from authors that an individual should not review their submission, if these are well-reasoned and practicable*
- *being guided by the COPE flowcharts (<http://publicationethics.org/flowcharts>) in cases of suspected misconduct or disputed authorship*
- *publishing details of how they handle cases of suspected misconduct (e.g. with links to the COPE flowcharts)*
- *publishing submission and acceptance dates for articles*

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4. Relations with editors

- 4.1. Editors should provide guidance to reviewers on everything that is expected of them including the need to handle submitted material in confidence. This guidance should be regularly updated and should refer or link to this code.
- 4.2. Editors should require reviewers to disclose any potential competing interests before agreeing to review a submission.
- 4.3. Editors should have systems to ensure that peer reviewers' identities are protected unless they use an open review system that is declared to authors and reviewers.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *encouraging reviewers to comment on ethical questions and possible research and publication misconduct raised by submissions (e.g. unethical research design, insufficient detail on patient consent or protection of research subjects (including animals), inappropriate data manipulation and presentation)*
- *encouraging reviewers to comment on the originality of submissions and to be alert to redundant publication and plagiarism*
- *considering providing reviewers with tools to detect related publications(e.g. links to cited references and bibliographic searches)*
- *sending reviewers' comments to authors in their entirety unless they contain offensive or libellous remarks*
- *seeking to acknowledge the contribution of reviewers to the journal*
- *encouraging academic institutions to recognise peer review activities as part of the scholarly process*
- *monitoring the performance of peer reviewers and taking steps to ensure this is of high standard*
- *developing and maintaining a database of suitable reviewers and updating this on the basis of reviewer performance*
- *ceasing to use reviewers who consistently produce discourteous, poor quality or late reviews*
- *ensuring that the reviewer database reflects the community for their journal and adding new reviewers as needed*
- *using a wide range of sources (not just personal contacts) to identify potential new reviewers (e.g. author suggestions, bibliographic databases)*
- *following the COPE flowchart in cases of suspected reviewer misconduct*

5. Relations with editorial board members

- 5.1. Editors should provide new editorial board members with guidelines on everything that is expected of them and should keep existing members updated on new policies and developments.

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Best practice for editors would include:

- *having policies in place for handling submissions from editorial board members to ensure unbiased review identifying suitably qualified editorial board members who can actively contribute to the development and good management of the journal*
- *regularly reviewing the composition of the editorial board*
- *providing clear guidance to editorial board members about their expected functions and duties, which might include:*
 - *acting as ambassadors for the journal*
 - *supporting and promoting the journal*
 - *seeking out the best authors and best work (e.g. from meeting abstracts) and actively encouraging submissions*
 - *reviewing submissions to the journal*
 - *accepting commissions to write editorials, reviews and commentaries on papers in their specialist area*
 - *attending and contributing to editorial board meetings*
- *consulting editorial board members periodically (e.g. once a year) to gauge their opinions about the running of the journal, informing them of any changes to journal policies and identifying future challenges.*

6. Relations with journal owners and publishers

- 6.1. The relationship of editors to publishers and owners is often complex but should be based firmly on the principle of editorial independence.
- 6.2. Editors should make decisions on which articles to publish based on quality and suitability for the journal and without interference from the journal owner/publisher.
- 6.3. Editors should have a written contract(s) setting out their relationship with the journal's owner and/or publisher.
- 6.4. The terms of this contract should be in line with the COPE Code of Conduct for Journal Editors.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *establishing mechanisms to handle disagreements between themselves and the journal owner/publisher with due process'*
- *communicating regularly with their journal's owner and publisher*

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7. Editorial and peer review processes

- 7.1. Editors should strive to ensure that peer review at their journal is fair, unbiased and timely.
- 7.2. Editors should have systems to ensure that material submitted to their journal remains confidential while under review.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *ensuring that people involved with the editorial process (including themselves) receive adequate training and keep abreast of the latest guidelines, recommendations and evidence about peer review and journal management*
- *keeping informed about research into peer review and technological advances*
- *adopting peer review methods best suited for their journal and the research community it serves*
- *reviewing peer review practices periodically to see if improvement is possible*
- *referring troubling cases to COPE, especially when questions arise that are not addressed by the COPE flow charts, or new types of publication misconduct are suspected*
- *considering the appointment of an ombudsperson to adjudicate in complaints that cannot be resolved internally*

8. Editorial and peer review processes

- 8.1. Editors should take all reasonable steps to ensure the quality of the material they publish, recognising that journals and sections within journals will have different aims and standards.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *having systems in place to detect falsified data (e.g. inappropriately manipulated photographic images or plagiarised text) either for routine use or when suspicions are raised*
- *basing decisions about journal house style on relevant evidence of factors that raise the quality of reporting (e.g. adopting structured abstracts, applying guidance such as CONSORT²) rather than simply on aesthetic grounds or personal preference*



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9. Protecting individual data

- 9.1. Editors must obey laws on confidentiality in their own jurisdiction. Regardless of local statutes, however, they should always protect the confidentiality of individual information obtained in the course of research or professional interactions (e.g. between doctors and patients). It is therefore almost always necessary to obtain written informed consent for publication from people who might recognise themselves or be identified by others (e.g. from case reports or photographs). It may be possible to publish individual information without explicit consent if public interest considerations outweigh possible harms, it is impossible to obtain consent and a reasonable individual would be unlikely to object to publication.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *publishing their policy on publishing individual data (e.g. identifiable personal details or images) and explaining this clearly to authors*

Note that consent to take part in research or undergo treatment is not the same as consent to publish personal details, images or quotations.

10. Encouraging ethical research (e.g. research involving humans or animals)

- 10.1. Editors should endeavour to ensure that research they publish was carried out according to the relevant internationally accepted guidelines (e.g. the Declaration of Helsinki⁸ for clinical research, the AERA and BERA guidelines for educational research^{9, 10}).
- 10.2. Editors should seek assurances that all research has been approved by an appropriate body (e.g. research ethics committee, institutional review board) where one exists. However, editors should recognise that such approval does not guarantee that the research is ethical.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *being prepared to request evidence of ethical research approval and to question authors about ethical aspects (such as how research participant consent was obtained or what methods were employed to minimize animal suffering) if concerns are raised or clarifications are needed*
- *ensuring that reports of clinical trials cite compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki⁸, Good Clinical Practice¹¹ and other relevant guidelines to safeguard participants*
- *ensuring that reports of experiments on, or studies of, animals cite compliance with the US Department of Health and Human Services Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals¹² or other relevant guidelines*
- *appointing a journal ethics advisor or panel to advise on specific cases and review journal policies periodically*

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11. Dealing with possible misconduct

- 11.1. Editors have a duty to act if they suspect misconduct or if an allegation of misconduct is brought to them. This duty extends to both published and unpublished papers.
- 11.2. Editors should not simply reject papers that raise concerns about possible misconduct. They are ethically obliged to pursue alleged cases.
- 11.3. Editors should follow the COPE flowcharts¹³ where applicable.
- 11.4. Editors should first seek a response from those suspected of misconduct. If they are not satisfied with the response, they should ask the relevant employers, or institution, or some appropriate body (perhaps a regulatory body or national research integrity organization) to investigate.
- 11.5. Editors should make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a proper investigation into alleged misconduct is conducted; if this does not happen, editors should make all reasonable attempts to persist in obtaining a resolution to the problem. This is an onerous but important duty.

12. Ensuring the integrity of the academic record

- 12.1. Errors, inaccurate or misleading statements must be corrected promptly and with due prominence.
- 12.2. Editors should follow the COPE guidelines on retractions¹⁴.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *taking steps to reduce covert redundant publication (e.g. by requiring all clinical trials to be registered)¹⁵*
- *ensuring that published material is securely archived (e.g. via online permanent repositories, such as PubMed Central)¹⁶*
- *having systems in place to give authors the opportunity to make original research articles freely available*

13. Intellectual property

Editors should be alert to intellectual property issues and work with their publisher to handle potential breaches of intellectual property laws and conventions.



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Best practice for editors would include:

- *adopting systems for detecting plagiarism (e.g. software, searching for similar titles) in submitted items (either routinely or when suspicions are raised)*
- *supporting authors whose copyright has been breached or who have been the victims of plagiarism*
- *being prepared to work with their publisher to defend authors' rights and pursue offenders (e.g. by requesting retractions or removal of material from websites) irrespective of whether their journal holds the copyright*

14. Encouraging debate

- 14.1. Editors should encourage and be willing to consider cogent criticisms of work published in their journal.
- 14.2. Authors of criticised material should be given the opportunity to respond.
- 14.3. Studies reporting negative results should not be excluded.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *being open to research that challenges previous work published in the journal*

15. Complaints

- 15.1. Editors should respond promptly to complaints and should ensure there is a way for dissatisfied complainants to take complaints further. This mechanism should be made clear in the journal and should include information on how to refer unresolved matters to COPE.
- 15.2. Editors should follow the procedure set out in the COPE flowchart on complaints

16. Commercial considerations

- 16.1. Journals should have policies and systems in place to ensure that commercial considerations do not affect editorial decisions (e.g. advertising departments should operate independently from editorial departments).
- 16.2. Editors should have declared policies on advertising in relation to the content of the journal and on processes for publishing sponsored supplements.
- 16.3. Reprints should be published as they appear in the journal unless a correction needs to be included in which case it should be clearly identified.

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Best practice for editors would include:

- *publishing a general description of their journal's income sources (e.g. the proportions received from display advertising, reprint sales, sponsored supplements, page charges, etc.)*
- *ensuring that the peer review process for sponsored supplements is the same as that used for the main journal*
- *ensuring that items in sponsored supplements are accepted solely on the basis of academic merit and interest to*
- *readers and decisions about such supplements are not influenced by commercial considerations*

17. Conflicts of interest

- 17.1. Editors should have systems for managing their own conflicts of interest as well as those of their staff, authors, reviewers and editorial board members.
- 17.2. Journals should have a declared process for handling submissions from the editors, employees or members of the editorial board to ensure unbiased review.

Best practice for editors would include:

- *publishing lists of relevant interests (financial, academic and other kinds) of all editorial staff and members of editorial boards (which should be updated at least annually)*

References/further reading

1. MIAME (Minimum information about a microarray experiment): <http://www.mged.org/Workgroups/MIAME/miame.html>
2. CONSORT statement (and other reporting guidelines) can be found at: www.equator-network.org
3. BMJ transparency policy: <http://resources.bmj.com/bmj/authors/editorial-policies/transparency-policy>
4. Marusic A, et al. How the structure of contribution disclosure statements affects validity of authorship: a randomized study in a general medical journal. *Curr Med Res Opin* 2006;22:1035-44
5. ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors) uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals: http://www.icmje.org/urm_main.html
6. Responsible research publication: international standards for authors (Position statement developed at the 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity, Singapore, July 2010) In press, 2011)

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7. World Association of Medical Editors statement on the relationship between journal editors-in-chief and owners:
<http://www.wame.org/resources/policies>
8. World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki: <http://www.wma.net/e/ethicsunit/helsinki.htm>
9. American Educational Research Association ethical standards: http://www.aera.net/AboutAERA/Default.aspx?menu_id=90&id=222
10. American Psychological Association ethical principles: <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>
11. British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines <http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guidelines/>
12. Good Clinical Practice: <http://www.emea.europa.eu/pdfs/human/ich/013595en.pdf>
13. US Department of Health and Human Services Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals:
<http://www.nap.edu/readingroom/books/labrats/>
14. COPE flowcharts: <http://publicationethics.org/flowcharts>
15. COPE retraction guidelines:
http://publicationethics.org/files/u661/Retractions_COPE_gline_final_3_Sept_09__2_.pdf
16. De Angelis C, et al. Clinical trial registration: a statement from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. *Lancet* 2004;364:911-2
17. PubMed Central: <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/>

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