

2013 COPE seminar: "Publication ethics from student to professional"

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The Journal at COPE

Before we present this short report on our presentation at the annual 2013 European Committee on Publications Ethics Seminar, we would like to inform our readers what COPE is and the nature of Journal of Pakistan Medical Association's affiliation.

COPE is a 7000-strong body of medical editors with a central council that provides publication ethics-related advice, "in particular, how to handle cases of research and publication misconduct."¹ It must be mentioned that COPE does not investigate individual cases rather it encourages editors to ensure that cases are investigated by the appropriate authorities, for instance the home institution, employer or research funding body.¹

JPMA as a member regularly participates in the online webinars on ethics issues held every three months, and also follows publication guidelines of COPE. Over the last few months, JPMA contributors have noticed an increase in the number of checks and balances required by us. Our newly-introduced Institutional Approval letter, the first of its kind for any journal in Pakistan, is also in line with COPE requirements to make the institution accountable for misdoings on its premises.

Our Experiences of Unethical Practices

The annual COPE symposium in London provides an opportunity for journal editors to get together, get acquainted with the latest guidelines on writing and publication ethics, and discuss the various problems encountered in their respective countries.

This year was the second time that JPMA was represented at the COPE seminar, and it was a learning experience overall. The theme for the 2013 event was also quite pertinent, "Publication ethics from student to professional", and is something JPMA runs into every

week. If it is not a young medical professional dropping by at our office to ask about authorship rights, it is a reviewer complaining about unethical behaviour by renowned names in the field.

Reproducing a poster in print in its entirety is not practical, and so here we share a brief abstract of our presentation, which was based on a retrospective observational review to identify the major publication ethics cases - including authorships issues, duplicate publication and plagiarism — encountered in the last five years (2008-2012). By major cases we mean those publications where the correspondences ran into months and over years, where the plagiarism was done so skillfully that it escaped Turnitin's radar, and where the ethical issues were complicated enough to compromise careers.

After a review of all case records, 12 major violations were detected: authorship issues, 7; duplicate publications, 3; and major plagiarism, 2.

The entire presentation can be viewed online on the JPMA website, but for our less tech-savvy readers, we reproduce 3 cases that would interest them:

Cases 1 and 2: Three articles each were submitted by two groups of unrelated researchers; all six articles had the supervisor as the first author, followed by a list of student's names. It was apparent that the papers were student projects based on simple, descriptive, questionnaire based studies. On enquiry, no justification could be provided for the authorship criteria. Off-the-record, the students were coerced and warned of dire consequences if they did not agree to the order of authors. Further correspondence and questioning lead to a request to withdraw the articles. The research departments and the vice-chancellors of the universities were contacted for the institutions authorship policy, with no response.

A web search in January 2013 showed that two of these articles were published in an on-line journal in the second half of 2012 with major revisions in the authorships but not text. In Study A, the names of 2 senior faculty members were further added, and the

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name of 4 students removed. In Study B, 3 faculty member names had been added and 3 students names removed.

Case 3: A researcher who had submitted a plagiarized article to another local journal was caught out. That case was reported to the higher authorities of the concerned university, and as a punishment by the Dean, the author was asked to withdraw all his/her recent submissions from all national journals. Author accepted his/her unethical act and sent a letter acknowledging the wrong committed and requested for withdrawing three articles submitted lately to JPMA. The author wrote, "I have a feeling of shame and guilt for the misconduct committed by myself. I made a serious mistake by copying the articles and now realize it was wrong".

We wrote back, "It was very sad to learn of your case of misconduct. You do realize that doing wrong has a bad end. But it is encouraging to note that you realized and accepted your mistake and feel sorry for performing

the unethical act."

Conclusion

Human nature is the same world over, and so are issues of ethics. JPMA encounters unethical conduct of authors which can be attributed to language barrier or lack of command on the English language; students and faculty being under pressure to publish for promotion; greed for publication; and senior faculty members are not familiar with the prescribed guidelines for ethical research.

At JPMA we would be keeping a sharp eye on any ethics related issues and hope to take stern action against the individuals involved. Please do share your feedback with us and let us know of violations we might have missed by emailing to us at jpma_jpma@hotmail.com.

Reference

1. Committee on Publication Ethics. (Homepage on the Internet). (Cited 2013 February 27). Available from URL: <http://publicationethics.org/>.