

A year of growth and development for COPE

COPE was born in 1997, went through puberty towards the end of the last millennium, and is now entering early adult life. COPE has transformed itself from an informal self help group for editors to a mature organisation with a constitution and elected officers.

In March 2001 we sought nominations for a chair, vice chair and treasurer. I was delighted to be elected as chair and welcome Richard Smith as vice chair and Alex Williamson as treasurer. Anastacia Kirk will continue to act as secretary to the council, and we are extremely grateful for all her hard work. Following the elections the new council met at an extraordinary meeting on 18 June 2001 and nominated four additional members of council. I am delighted to report that Professor Lesley Rees, Dr Sabine Kleinert, Dr Fiona Godlee and Professor Ian Kennedy have agreed to serve on council for three years. We are indebted to Roger Dowsett for his assistance in advising on our constitution, which is included as an appendix to this report.

COPE has matured not only with respect to its governance procedures, but also in its membership. Our treasurer has worked indefatigably to recruit major publishing houses into the COPE network. Harcourt have signed eight of their European journals, and Oxford University Press 11 titles. And negotiations continue with Blackwell Science, Elsevier, and the Nature publishing group. Other biomedical journals have joined COPE on an individual basis.

We therefore believe that COPE now represents a substantial proportion of UK biomedical journals and is expanding into Europe. COPE's internationalisation is also recognised by its close contacts with the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) with which we collaborate on ethics and difficult cases. COPE is therefore firmly established as a properly constituted organisation with an identifiable governance structure and an increasingly sound, independent financial base.

COPE has achieved some of its initial objectives – namely, to advise editors on the management of possible cases of research and publication misconduct and to produce *The COPE Guidelines on Good Publication Practice*. It also is committed to promoting research and education and to this end the council has decided to establish two subcommittees to pursue these objectives. As part of its educational activities, COPE organised a one day seminar in October 2001 to discuss whether the UK needs an independent national panel

to advise on research and publication misconduct. Professor Sir George Alberti opened the day with a view from the royal colleges which was followed by presentations from Magne Nylenna and Drummond Rennie, summarising the experience in Scandinavia and the USA, respectively. This was followed by workshops to consider specific issues on how a national panel might operate in the UK.

There was unanimous agreement that a national panel was required, although there was a spectrum of opinion as to whether this panel would be merely advisory or might move towards acquiring statutory powers to conduct enquiries. It was widely acknowledged that as more than two years had elapsed since the 1999 Consensus Conference in Edinburgh had recommended the establishment of such a panel, there was now a sense of urgency and a vital need to identify who might lead such an initiative.

The COPE Guidelines on Good Publication Practice continue to evolve and some further amendments have been made this year, particularly with respect to “ghost authorship.” An updated version of the Guidelines appears as an appendix to this report.

I and other members of COPE continue to be dissatisfied with the lack of progress in establishing appropriate procedures to deal with research and publication misconduct in the UK. Although a number of guidelines exist for individual organisations, with the exception of the General Medical Council, there is no obvious body to whom “whistleblowers,” higher education institutions, and NHS Trusts can go to for advice. And there is no central repository of cases which could begin the process to start to answer questions about the prevalence and severity of research misconduct in Britain.

Furthermore, there has been no audit as to how these various guidelines have been implemented and no indication whatsoever of the outcome of internal enquiries. The Banerjee case was finally resolved in November 2000, almost a decade after it was first published, with his suspension by the GMC for publishing fraudulent data. Since then some of us have had questions about the validity of internal enquiries that remain “in camera” and never have to report their findings to the outside world.

Professor Michael JG Farthing
Chair of COPE
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