

# Fourth International Congress on Peer Review in Biomedical Publication, Barcelona, Spain, September 14–16, 2001

## Plenary session abstract

The Work of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)

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The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) is an informal group founded in 1997 as a response to growing anxiety about the integrity of authors submitting studies to medical journals.

Founded by British medical editors, including those of the *BMJ*, *Gut*, and the *Lancet*, the committee had five aims:

- (1) To advise on cases brought by editors. Cases are presented anonymously, and full responsibility for action remains with the reporting editor. The committee has so far considered 103 cases. In 80 cases there was evidence of misconduct. Several cases have been referred to employers and to regulatory bodies like Britain's General Medical Council. The commonest problems were undeclared redundant publication or submission (29 cases), disputes over authorship (18), falsification (15), failure to obtain informed consent (11), performing unethical research (11), failure to gain approval from an ethics committee (10), and fabrication of data.
- (2) Publish an annual report describing the cases it considers. The committee has published three annual reports and established a web site ([www.publicationethics.org.uk](http://www.publicationethics.org.uk))
- (3) Draft guidance on these issues. The committee drafted guidelines and after extensive consultation published them in 1999 (available on the web site). They have been adopted by many journals.
- (4) Promote research into publication ethics. Little has been achieved so far.
- (5) Consider offering teaching and training. The committee has run two seminars, and individual members of the committee have lectured and taught on research misconduct.

COPE has also been concerned to ensure that the scientific community in Britain responds to research misconduct. Britain has now had several high profile cases of research misconduct, but has yet to make a coherent response to the problem. Several bodies, including the Royal Society and the General Medical Council, are currently considering the problem, and COPE has been important both in spurring these bodies to action and in contributing to a response. COPE might have proved to be a temporary body, but members of the committee judge that its work must con-

tinue. It has thus published a draft constitution and proposes to formalise itself.

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## Poster session abstract

Guidelines for Good Publication Practice: The COPE Experience  
Richard Horton

**Objective:** The United Kingdom's Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) was formed in 1997. It aims to provide a forum for editors to seek advice about allegations of misconduct. Early experience of COPE indicated that there was an urgent need for more formal guidance in matters relating to suspected breaches of research and publication ethics, and COPE set out to produce guidelines for good publication practice.

**Design:** A conference was held in April 1999 to discuss the creation of guidelines. Participation was inclusive: in addition to COPE members, the meeting was open to the UK medical licensing authority (General Medical Council) and the royal colleges. Eighty people took part, and draft guidelines written by COPE members were tabled for discussion.

**Results:** The final guidelines included sections on study design and ethical approval, data analysis, authorship, conflicts of interest, peer review, redundant publication, plagiarism, duties of editors, media relations, advertising, and dealing with misconduct. The guidelines were published in the 1999 COPE report. Since first publication, these guidelines have been republished and endorsed by 28 journals. Two revisions were proposed in 2000 about ghost authorship and contacting authors regarding alleged misconduct.

**Conclusions:** Self-organisation by editors to deal with cases of alleged scientific misconduct has led to guidelines that aim to provide a more consistent basis for decision making. In drawing up these guidelines and in securing endorsement for them, we found a large degree of unmet need and enthusiasm among editorial colleagues. A secondary effect was to stimulate statutory national bodies to take misconduct more seriously.

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