

COPE's fifth year

COPE is now 5 years old. Having started in 1997 as an informal self-help group for editors, it is now an organisation with a constitution, elected officers and a membership which includes many UK publishers and more than 170 journal editors.

COPE's primary function is to offer a forum for editors who are struggling to manage cases of possible research and publication misconduct. This continues to be an important part of the Committee's work, although the number of cases has fallen over the past year. This could indicate that COPE has been successful in providing advice for a cohort of editors who are now coping well. It might also indicate that the number of cases of publication misconduct have decreased, possibly because of the increased awareness of authors of the importance of reporting their work honestly and with integrity.

Since 1997 COPE has organised four seminars, the first of which, on how editors should respond to publication misconduct, set the scene for our future work. It drew on expertise from Europe and North America and one of the important messages to emerge was that when concerns arose, editors would not be fulfilling their editorial responsibilities if they just rejected the manuscript.

COPE then set about developing a set of guidelines for *Good Publication Practice*. In 1999 the second seminar on "Setting a new agenda for Good Publication Practice" considered a draft guidelines document. Following a series of workshops, the first guidelines were subsequently published in the 1999 COPE report. Since then, these Guidelines have been updated on several occasions and will continue to evolve over the years.

In October 1999, there was a joint consensus conference on "Misconduct in Biomedical Research" at the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh. Many important stakeholders were represented, including the General Medical Council, the Royal Colleges, the National Health Service, the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Medicine, the Association for British Pharmaceutical Industries, publishers and journal editors.

The consensus panel agreed a broad definition of research misconduct, made suggestions as to how to promote good research, and finally recommended the establishment of a national panel. The panel's task would be to co-ordinate a national effort to document cases of research misconduct, to advise on the investigation of alleged cases, and to develop preventive strategies.

Regrettably, little action occurred until early 2002, when at a meeting of stakeholders convened by the President of the Royal College of Physicians London, it was decided that the Academy of Medical Sciences, under the leadership of its President, Sir Peter Lachman, should take the lead in developing a framework for such a national panel.

Some progress has been made, as outlined by Sir Peter in his recent address at the 4th COPE seminar, "Promoting integrity in research and publication," which took place in October 2002. This report includes an account of progress so far, but there are major concerns that this panel will have insufficient commitment and authority to make a real difference. Yet again, the UK seems to be lagging behind North America and other European countries in this regard.

In the 1998 COPE report, objectives were set for COPE's future work. COPE has advised editors on the management of possible cases of research and publication misconduct and will continue to do so. In its seminars and in the day to day working of the Committee and its Council, it has considered many of the broader issues in publication and research ethics, including authorship, confidentiality, editorial freedom and media relations. The Guidelines have already been mentioned, and the website bears testimony to the annual reports (www.publicationethics.org).

But earlier this year the COPE Council decided to establish two subcommittees, one for research in publication ethics and the other to develop educational strategies, to enable us to fulfil our other objectives: to offer teaching and training about research and publication integrity.

There are still many unanswered questions in the field of research and publication ethics. Every journalist wants to know how common it is. Embarrassingly, in the UK we are not able to answer this question. We still do not have a clear idea as to why people commit research misconduct nor do we know whether there is a progression from minor misdemeanours to the more serious aspects of research fraud.

Our experience as editors suggests that there continues to be a level of ignorance as to what constitutes research and publication misconduct. This may reflect poor training and supervision, but it may also indicate changing attitudes in society as to what constitutes economy with the truth. It is clear, however, that research misconduct is not limited to biomedicine, following the devastating revelations of research fraud committed by Jan Hendrik Schön in the physical sciences in Bell Laboratories, New Jersey.

COPE continues to be concerned about the apparent tardiness of British academia and others to give research and publication misconduct an appropriate priority rating. Fraudulent research can damage patients. We have agencies to ensure food and water quality, and these are now regarded as an essential component of public protection. Why should we not expect the same standards from our research?

Michael JG Farthing
Chair, COPE
November 2002