

Introduction: COPE moves on

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chair of COPE and editor of *Gut*

It's now five years since COPE was founded as a self help group for editors, struggling with ethical issues in their publications. COPE has since taken on the role of an action group, the primary objective of which has been to call for an independent body to monitor research ethics and publication misconduct in biomedicine.

COPE has also published guidelines on publication ethics, which have been well received, and continue to be updated on an annual basis. And it has run three seminars—another very important part of our activities.

The first, with contributions from the USA and Europe, was held in our foundation year in 1997, to set the agenda and to begin to benchmark our responses. The second, in 1999, took the form of workshops to draft our guidelines.

Last year's seminar was directed particularly to determining whether there was a need for an independent body to deal with biomedical research misconduct. The answer was yes. And in our subsequent annual report, we published some ideas for useful ways in which that could be taken forward.

COPE now has a constitution, with elected officers. This has enabled us to further our original agenda, by creating two subcommittees to look into how we might foster research on publication ethics and offer education and training on the issues.

We will hear more about these later today, and part of this afternoon's presentation will include an exercise to test out how some of these ideas might work in the future.

Over the past year, discussions have focused on whether publication ethics should cover medicine, biomedicine, or extend more widely into other sciences and the arts, and this will be the focus of first presentation.

We will then consider the work undertaken by the Academy of Medical Sciences in driving forward the establishment of an independent review body for research misconduct. In 1999 the Edinburgh consensus came up with a broad definition of misconduct and several suggestions for promoting ethical research.

The most important outcome of this meeting was the proposal for national body akin to those in the USA and Scandinavia. Three years later we are still waiting.

COPE has now published in excess of 150 cases that have been reported to the committee, although interestingly, the numbers submitted have fallen over the past year, and we really don't know why.

It could be that COPE has helped editors, and we've all learnt how to deal with cases of research

misconduct, and don't feel the same need to bring everything to the committee. Perhaps there has been a real decrease in the numbers of offences. Or maybe we've given authors a warning shot over the bows, and they know that editors are becoming more robust in their handling of such cases, and are reporting authors to heads of institutions.

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But the truth is, we don't know if misconduct really is on the decline or, indeed, what's going on in the rest of the UK.

Why does any of this matter? Those of us who are journal editors, or who head up faculties or institutions, are accountable. We need to know what our staff are doing and we have to be accountable to the public. And at the moment, we are simply not able to do that.

SESSION 1

Chair: Richard Smith

Editor *British Medical Journal*, vice chair of COPE

I used to believe that integrity was something you were born with, and that unless you fell into wicked ways, it continued. But now I've realised that integrity is something you have to work at every day, and that it is very easy to stumble.

Let me give you a couple of examples. The satirical magazine *Private Eye* pointed out that the reviewers used by the *BMJ* to rebut their MMR exposé, Professor David Elliman and Dr Helen Bedford, have ties with vaccine manufacturers. The magazine said that the *BMJ* forgot to mention this, claiming it was an oversight.

Because the piece was in our Medicine and the Media section, we did not ask the authors to declare competing interests. If it had been an editorial, we, of course, would have done so.

I've just had an article rejected from the *BMJ* because we failed to get prior ethics committee approval. A dozen of the 150 or so reported COPE cases fell into this category.

So you see, it is very easy to stumble into wicked ways. And we shouldn't think that we are the virtuous few, looking out at the horizon trying to spot monsters, because some of us are those monsters.

Journalists regularly ask me why all the fraud cases seem to be concentrated in biomedicine, and not in physics or astronomy or biochemistry. Is it that we are uniquely wicked?

It could be that there really is more fraud in biomedicine. It could be a denominator problem in

that there is more research in this field. It could be that there is a lot of pharmaceutical company money around. It could be that biomedicine is full of amateur researchers. Or it could be that it is not true at all and there is just as much going on in other areas of science.

But when I get asked: 'why does it happen?' my response is: why wouldn't it? Every area of human endeavour is shot through with wicked behaviour. Casinos operate on the premise that everyone is wicked and trying to get away with something, so there are cameras everywhere. But academic science does exactly the opposite, so it's not surprising that wickedness is rather easy to perpetrate.