Role of Journals in Addressing Scientific Misconduct

Council of Science Editors Retreat with funding from the Office of Research Integrity, November 7-9, 2003, Lansdowne, Virginia, USA

This retreat was organized as the result of the increasing awareness of journal editors' responsibility for active prevention and management of research misconduct. Editors-in-chief of the most reputable biomedical journals, such as *The Lancet, Journal of American Medical Association*, or *British Medical Journal*, deans of several USA universities, heads and officials of various science institutions (Office of Research Integrity, National Science Foundation, National Library of Medicine, and American Physical Society) met to discuss the issue of great concern – how to deal with fraudulent manuscripts.

After several introductory lectures, the participants divided in small groups and discussed several cases and the measures, both already undertaken and those to be undertaken by editors, to resolve suspected or proven fraud.

Diagnosis

The fraudulent behavior is a real issue and the incidence of fraudulent publications might be even greater than recognized, since the data from the so-called small journals are lacking. Another issue is also a real one: editors are reluctant to deal with such an unhappy business. True enough, dealing with fraud needs both courage and persistence. However, editors play critical roles in responding to allegations or evidence of scientific misconduct discovered during the review of manuscripts. It is also their responsibility to respond to comments received after publication, and to provide that literature is cleansed from fraudulent publications. Otherwise, they risk to be accused for institutional corruption, practice that is severely (and righteously) criticized.

Preventive Measures

The complete prevention of fraud is an unrealistic aim, but it is possible to diminish the incidence. This requires additional steps on behalf of editors. To protect themselves against potential problems associated with dealing with suspected misconduct, editors should (a) define and publish (in *Guidelines for Authors*) the journal's policy regarding good editorial practice, (b) ask authors and reviewers to disclose conflict of interest, if any; (c) reject suspected fraudulent manuscripts; and (d) pursue possible scientific misconduct in manuscripts submitted to or published in their journals.

Whether it is ethical for editors to disclose cases of author misconduct to the editors of other journals was much debated, but without final consensus. However, it was agreed that the absence of procedures creates the possibility that suspected manuscripts would be published elsewhere.

Finally, it was emphasized that the best way for editors to improve the ethical environment of publishing is to act as educators, e.g., to publish editorials and other articles dealing with research and publica-

tion ethics, and to lecture and encourage discussions on this item. The cooperation of the Council of Science Editors (CSE) and other institutions, such as the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), Council on Publication Ethics (COPE), and Office of Research Integrity may be helpful, since these organizations are committed to working with editors in addressing scientific misconduct.

Correcting the Literature

If fraudulent articles are already published, editors should do the following:

1. Publish corrections, letters of concern, or retraction in accordance with criteria set by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, the so-called Vancouver rules (1);

2. It is not the responsibility of editors to conduct a full investigation or decide whether scientific misconduct occurred, but they should inform the institution where the work was conducted or the funding agency. These institutions are responsible for investigating, for providing a fair, accurate, timely and fact-based process, and for imposing the sanctions in accordance to good scientific practice.

3. The National Library of Medicine (NLM) policy is to add records that are retractions of previously published articles indexed in MEDLINE.

Problems That May Be Met

Dealing with fraud is never an easy duty for editors. Difficult problems they face include gray areas of norms, complex subject matter, and usually highly charged emotional environment. Potential pitfalls include investigative inexperience, bias and conflict of interests, and moving targets (charges and counter charges). In addition, sometimes obsessed whistleblowers may make the problem even more difficult. In particular, the editors may be reluctant to deal with fraud because of fear of litigation. Although understandable, the reluctance to deal with these problems is unacceptable: editors simply cannot escape the responsibility for active prevention and management of research misconduct. Trying to prevent a problem is always better than trying to police it. The proper editors' policy is of utter importance for maintaining public trust in the integrity of science.

Small Journals Editors' Practice and Experience

Editors of large journals who came to the meeting expressed their sympathy and understanding for their colleague editors of small journals, who are hardworking people doing this job on voluntary basis and having no time to investigate and police misconduct. However, to my best knowledge, these people (at least in my surroundings, the so-called scientific periphery), being well aware of the need to fight against scientific misconduct, have already undertaken several actions.

In Serbia, the campaign has started by educational approach: to spread the awareness of good scientific practice, a small group of scientists, after delivering lectures to various scientific audiences, have published in small journals (*Srpski Arhiv za Celokupno Lekarstvo, Archive of Oncology, Stomatološki Glas Srbije, Balkan Journal of Stomatology, Journal of Balkan Union of Oncology*, and *Medicus*) numerous articles and a monograph in 2002 (2) dealing with publication ethics. These efforts were echoed in larger scientific community. For instance, the Medical Faculty, University of Belgrade, introduced a mandatory course on research ethics for postgraduate students in 2002. Several small journals organized meetings dealing with publication ethics (3,4). Knowing that it is much easier to talk than to act, the pioneers of this work helped resolving the very first case of plagiarism ever published in Serbia (5,6), thus breaking the long-standing practice of silencing unpleasant affairs (an opportunistic, and therefore unethical behavior).

In Croatia, this movement has started even earlier, mainly due to the editors and researchers around the *Croatian Medical Journal*. These people not only publish articles on publication ethics (7-9) and lecture science ethics to medical students (10), but have also crowned their efforts by establishing in 2001 the Editor for Research Integrity in their Journal. Their practice and experience were highly inspirational to many scientists (including myself) interested in publishing and editing.

These achievements resulted from the strict adherence of small scientific communities to the "Think globally, act locally" principle (7). I have been asked by several small journals to write a report on the Meeting. I think that this fact reflects the growing interest of the so-called scientific periphery in this extremely hot topic – the improvement of ethical climate of the publication enterprise.

Ljiljana Vučković-Dekić
Institute for Oncology and Cardiology of Serbia
Pasterova 14. POB 228
11000 Belgrade, Serbia and Monte Negro
ljvd@ncrc.ac.yu

1 International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals: writing and editing for biomedical publication. Available from: *www.icmje.org*. Accessed: January 16, 2004.

2 Vučković-Dekić Lj, Milenković P, Šobić V. Scientific research ethics in biomedicine [in Serbian]. Academy of Medical Sciences of Serbian Physician Society and Beograd University School of Medicine. Beograd: Sprint, 2002.

3 Symposium on manuscript peer reviewing in biomedical journals. Archive of Oncology. 2002;10:85-101.

4 Symposium on editing scientific journals [in Serbian]. Srpski Arhiv za Celokupno Lekarstvo. In press 2002.

5 Mirčetić V. Retraction (cancellation) of the article "Endocrine axis (hypothalamus – pituitary gland – adrenal gland cortex/ghonades) and peripheral nervous system in rheumatoid arthritis" by Božo Josipović i Aleksandra Josipović, published in Acta Rheumatologica Belgra-

densia 2002;32:27-41 [in Serbian]. Acta Rheumatologica Belgradensia. 2002;32:75.

6 Vučković-Dekić Lj. Good editorial practice. The procedure of published scientific article retraction (cancellation) [in Serbian]. Acta Rheumatologica Belgradensia. 2002;32:149-53.

7 Marušić M, Marušić A. Good editorial practice: editors as educators. Croat Med J. 2001;42:113-20.

8 Petrovečki M, Scheetz MD. Croatian Medical Journal introduces culture, control and the study of research integrity. Croat Med J. 2001;42:7-13.

9 Mišak A. Citius, altius, fortius in 2001. Croat Med J. 2001;42:4-6.

10 Marušić A, Marušić M. Teaching students how to read and write science: a mandatory course on scientific research and communication in medicine. Acad Med. 2003;78:1235-9.