

# Author misconduct: What journal editors do when they suspect and find it?

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## INTRODUCTION

Scientific literature helps science to advance further. Literature on medical science helps care givers in patient care and researchers in planning of future researches. Maintaining the sanctity and robustness of scientific literature is the moral duty of those contributing to it. Fraud on authors' part, whether deliberate or unintentional, demeans the spirit of research, deceives those who use scientific information and damages the credibility.

Research misconduct is defined by National Institute of Health, USA as "fabrication, falsification or plagiarism in proposing, performing or reviewing research, or in reporting research results."<sup>[1]</sup> "Fabrication is making up data or results and recording or reporting them. Falsification is manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record. Plagiarism is the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit. Research misconduct does not include honest error or

differences of opinion."<sup>[1]</sup> Once suspected for academic fraud in scientific world, unlike democratic judicial system, the burden to provide evidence to prove the contrary or to prove that the conduct was the result of an honest error or difference of opinion rests with the author.<sup>[1]</sup>

One's publication record is his performance indicator in the academic world and also helps in getting selections, promotions, financial sponsorships and awards. With the advances in technology, research is becoming more and more sophisticated, costlier and demanding. All these factors along with the pressure to publish are the reasons why scientists indulge in misconduct and its incidence is on the rise.<sup>[2,3]</sup> Steen identified 788 retracted English publications between 2000 and 2010 in PUBMED database.<sup>[2]</sup> Error (73.5%) accounted for greater number of retractions than fraud (26.5%). Eight reasons were identified for retraction and the single most common was the scientific mistake (31.5%). Titus estimated that around 1000 cases of research misconduct go unreported annually in the United States.<sup>[4]</sup> So probably retracted articles only represent tip of the iceberg of total instances of research misconduct.

Though scientific literature is believed to be self correcting, sometimes this might take years and it would have led to significant damage in terms of wastage of resources, money and inappropriate patient care by the time it gets self corrected. Thus curbing the menace at the earliest should be our aim.

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## EDITOR'S INQUEST WHEN AUTHOR MISCONDUCT IS SUSPECTED?

Editors are responsible for everything that is published in their journals.<sup>[5]</sup> It is their obligation to act when they suspect misconduct or a suspected misconduct is brought to their notice in relation to an unpublished or published manuscript. Some cases are simple while

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some complex cases can take more than a year to reach a conclusion. Editor always tries to speed up the investigation and dispute resolution.

#### Before publication

Usually it is the reviewers who initially suspect author misconduct, when a manuscript is sent for peer review. Reviewers' role is very important as a diligent, experienced and learned reviewer would seize a fraudulent publication at this initial step itself. Reviewers should be armed with means like software, which can make rapid comparison between the text of the submitted manuscript and databases from published literature to detect plagiarism and he should have access to full text articles of most of the journals. Cases of duplicate submission will still be missed. Some journal asks authors to submit copies of authors' published papers or other manuscripts in preparation or submitted elsewhere that are related to the manuscript to be considered.<sup>[6]</sup> Whenever a reviewer suspects misconduct in the form of fabrication/manipulation with data or plagiarism, whether minor or significant; he performs detailed analysis. If the reviewer considers his suspicion reasonable, it is reported to the editor promptly with all the documentary evidence. Editor himself then verifies the suspicion, assesses any conflict of interest between author and reviewer and if convinced of the misconduct, he is ethically bound to pursue these alleged cases to their logical conclusion.

Editor then asks the author for explanation while keeping the whistle-blower reviewers' identity anonymous as this can lead to retaliation from the author against the reviewer. Committee on publication ethics (COPE) flowcharts guide the editors in their enquiry.<sup>[7]</sup> If the author provides satisfactory explanation, then the editor proceeds with the peer-review process and informs the reviewer about it. If author is unable to provide a satisfactory explanation, the manuscript is rejected with the information on why the manuscript is rejected being conveyed to the author(s) and the reviewer. The authors are cautioned against repeat misconduct in the future. If the author does not respond to query, then the editor can contact the co-authors for an explanation and can also ask the department in which the author works or the institution body or the funding agency to investigate the case. In case the investigation is unsatisfactory, depending upon the vileness of the case, it is at the discretion of editor to abandon the case or take up the

matter with some national or international research integrity organization dealing with cases of research misconduct.

#### After publication

Usually it is the readers and sometimes the editor himself, reviewers, publishers allege or suspect author misconduct after the fraudulent paper gets published in the journal. Editor first himself verifies the authenticity of the allegation. In case of plagiarism (duplicate/redundant publication), editor checks for the extent of overlap.<sup>[7]</sup> If the overlap is significant, the manuscript needs to be retracted, irrespective of author's opinion and author is informed about it. In case of little overlap, a correction notice or reference to previous work is mentioned in a notice linked to the article.

Inappropriate allegation can ruin the career of an innocent researcher. Therefore, every allegation is handled diligently.<sup>[8]</sup> Before framing formal allegation letter, editor can inquire for more raw data from the author to verify and substantiate the allegations. It is the policy of several high impact factor journals to examine raw data. Therefore, it is imperative on part of the authors to preserve raw data for sufficiently long time even after the study is published.

In dermatology literature, images are a very significant component of the manuscript. Images often need minor modifications to bring clarity and to present what was actually seen. Doing manipulation to an extent so as to alter the result is not acceptable. Modifying images from others' publication/archive and publishing it with the claim that it is the authors' own also forms a basis for research misconduct. If the editor still suspects fraud, then he can launch official formal allegation against the author seeking explanation and clarification.

There can be three scenarios. First, author is able to provide concrete evidence to prove the contrary. Editor extends gratitude to the author. The one who raised the suspicion is also informed about the development.

Second scenario could be that author(s) admits the mistake and gives reasoning (extenuating circumstances, inadvertently, error of supporting staff, performance pressure, financial gain, seniors' pressure). Editor then decides regarding the penalty for the author depending upon the seriousness of

the misconduct. He also prepares and publishes a correction or retraction notice to correct the literature.

Third scenario could be when author provides evidence but are not convincing enough or he does not reply to the points raised. In that scenario, the editor approaches the department/institution to investigate the matter and find the truth. If the editor feels that investigation is likely to be inconclusive, a notice expressing concern linked to the original article is printed.

Contribution of whistle-blower should always be acknowledged and revealed with his permission and provided with meaningful protection from retaliation from the accused author.<sup>[9]</sup>

### **CORRECTING THE LITERATURE AND PENALTY FOR THE MISCONDUCT**

In case of already published manuscript, once the author misconduct is proved, editor strives to correct the literature and decide upon the penalty for the author. Journal editors can issue a retraction or correction notice to correct the literature or in inconclusive cases issue an expression of concern.

Retraction notices deprecate not only the author but also the journal, publisher, department and institution where work was done, and also the name of the country. A publication is retracted when there is definite evidence that the findings are unreliable (result of misconduct or honest error), proven plagiarism (redundant/duplicate publication) or unethical research.<sup>[10]</sup> Retraction notice is published in both electronic and printed text, is linked to the retracted article in all electronic versions, clearly mentioning the title and all the authors in the heading of retraction notice, state who is retracting and the reason behind retraction. It should be freely available to all the readers. Defamatory lines are best avoided as retraction notice aim to preserve the integrity of literature and not meant to offend the authors who commit the misconduct.

Journal editor can issue correction notice in case of only a small portion of the manuscript is incorrect because of misconduct or honest error but otherwise the manuscript is reliable.<sup>[10]</sup> An expression of concern is issued when the editor believes that the investigation is likely to be inconclusive or will be unfair and partial,

or will take long period of time, or if editor is unable to proceed with the investigation as the institution and or author(s) are not willing to co-operate.<sup>[10]</sup>

Decision regarding the penalty for misconduct also rests with the editor. Editor can himself opine or can take the help of other members of the editorial board. Editorial committee can do stratification of different types and degree of misconduct, and punishment planned accordingly. Penalty can take various forms. For a minor misconduct or honest error, editor can simply caution the author for the future conduct. In cases of serious misconduct, author can be barred from publication in the journal for some fixed period or an indefinite period. Furthermore, the department and institution concerned can be informed about the specifics of the act of misconduct.

### **MEASURES TO SAFEGUARD THE LITERATURE**

“Prevention is better than cure.” So the scientific community should devise measures to discourage and put off the act of author misconduct before a fraudulent publication gets a place in the literature. This goal can be achieved by intervening at various levels starting from waking up the conscience of an individual researcher to framing of international policies.

Most of the researchers, barring a few are honest and diligent. Those who do unethical research do know most of the time what is ethical.<sup>[11]</sup> Junior researchers tend to walk along the footsteps of their seniors and mentors. Seniors should set high standards of research integrity and be the role model.<sup>[12]</sup> Furthermore, they should keep a vigilant eye on the working of the junior researchers and supporting staff functioning under them, review raw data themselves, verify results, and insist to present their results as it is while stressing on the need of authenticity of the data.<sup>[13]</sup> Journal editorial board has the most important responsibility to safeguard the literature. Journal should have clear policies in case of misconduct, the actions and the consequences and same should be mentioned on the journal website.<sup>[14]</sup>

In case of original studies author should provide details of work done (raw data). All authors should have active E-mail account and all of them should be intimated about the submission including the manuscript and the first page mentioning individual author's contribution. Journal site should provide

software to authors in addition to reviewers and the members on editorial board to check for unknowing plagiarism. It should also provide links to national and international organizations' (COPE, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors [ICMJE], National Institute of Health-Office of Research Integrity [NIH-ORI]) websites to further enlighten the authors on this subject.

International organizations like COPE, ICMJE and NIH-ORI are striving to preserve the veracity of the literature. COPE was set up in United Kingdom in 1997 to promulgate research ethics and now has over 7000 members worldwide. It is a forum for editors and publishers of peer reviewed journals to discuss issues related to publication ethics. It provides training to editors to enhance their ability to detect and deal with cases of publication misconduct. An individual case can be discussed in the forum but COPE itself does not investigate the case. Journals should accept COPE as general standard of ethical practice and advocate its authors to follow its guiding principles.

ICMJE is a group of general medical journal editors who meet annually and have formulated Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts submitted to Biomedical Journals. Journals that consent to use the Uniform Requirements should state in their instructions to authors that their requirements are in accordance with the Uniform Requirements and cite the latest version. These requirements have been framed and are revised regularly to increase the standard and promote ethical publication practice. United States has a government established agency NIH-ORI to deal with cases of research misconduct in federally funded research.

## CONCLUSION

Proven cases of author misconduct probably represent only tip of the iceberg. Responsibility for everything that is published in the journal vests with the journal editor. Therefore, the editor along with the editorial board is diligent and committed to preserve its

sanctity. Prevention of misconduct being committed requires intervention at various levels. Every case of author misconduct detected before or after publication should reach its conclusion. Final decision on the penalty for author misconduct resides with the editor. Penalty is individualized, depending upon the intent behind the misconduct and seriousness of its implications. We need to raise the conscience of the scientific community as a whole while keeping a check on the functioning of its mischievous members lest fraudulent research would continue.

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