Editorial

COPE guidelines on good publication practice

How common is misconduct in research and scientific publication? No-one really knows, but recent incidents suggest it is more common than we would like to think. There are many reasons including pressure to undertake research and publish for career advancement; naivety and lack of knowledge of what is acceptable; and just plain greed for power or financial gain. Dealing with the whole problem is well beyond the remit of editors of scientific journals. But they can and should do something about breaches of publication ethics. This can be very difficult for individual editors, many of whom are doing the work over and above their full time jobs. The approach of different journals has been uneven and uncoordinated. Editors have often felt unable to do anything beyond rejecting papers where misconduct is suspected, or perhaps refusing further articles from the authors concerned.

In 1997, COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) was founded as a voluntary body of concerned editors, to discuss cases and advise scientific editors and to find practical ways of dealing with the problem of research and publication misconduct. The 1999 COPE Report, Guidelines on good publication practice is reproduced in this issue of *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. The guidelines were developed by the committee and then submitted to extensive consultation. They cover study design and ethical approval, data analysis, authorship, conflicts of interest, peer review, redundant publication, plagiarism, duties of editors, media relations, and advertising. The intention is to review and revise the guidelines over time.

The guidelines about study design and data analysis reiterate what researchers should be well aware of anyway. The section on authorship includes helpful advice about how to reduce conflict in this difficult area and rightly emphasises that all authors must take public responsibility for the content of their paper. The advice to authors, editors, and reviewers about possible conflict of interest is clear: if in doubt, disclose. The peer review section is help-

ful and should reassure authors of the fairness of the process in journals following these guidelines. Readers will be aware that since late 1999 *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* has been asking reviewers if they agree to having their name revealed with their reviews and so far very few have not agreed.

Redundant publication and plagiarism are real concerns for editors and these unethical practices can be hard to identify. It is useful to have clear guidelines for authors in these areas. Ignorance of what is acceptable is no longer an excuse in these matters. This *Journal's* advice to authors who have any doubts about a paper (for example, if it contains some material in common with another paper) is to be fully open with us: we can then advise you appropriately. Disclosure will not reduce your chances of publication, but non-disclosure of relevant material certainly will.

The guidelines have a section on dealing with misconduct. This is mainly guidance for editors, but authors should be aware of the actions that editors will take in cases of suspected misconduct, to investigate and deal with the matter. In particular, authors should note that the employer or other appropriate body will be advised of possible serious misconduct at an early stage. A set of possible sanctions is recommended, ranging from a letter to the authors, through refusal to accept further papers, formal retraction of the paper, to informing the GMC or other body.

Occupational and Environmental Medicine, together with many other scientific journals, endorses the COPE guidelines. We are perhaps fortunate that we have rarely had concerns about serious misconduct among authors submitting papers to us. We will follow the guidelines in cases where we suspect possible misconduct.

ANNE COCKCROFT
Editor