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Publication ethics: the editor-author relationship

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ABSTRACT

Publication is considered the end point of the research project. New scientific results may be assessed, corrected and further developed by the scientific community only if they are published. Guidelines on responsible research and publication are now set, to encourage and promote high ethical standards in the conduct of research and in biomedical publications. They address various aspects of the research and publishing including duties of editors and authorship determination. This paper brings a short survey of editor-author relationship in the process of publication.

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INTRODUCTION

Publication of results is an integral and essential component of the process known as the scientific method to seek new knowledge (1). Publication is considered the end point of a research project. The scientific community can assess, correct and further develop our new scientific results only if they were published (2). The most important way to communicate and disseminate new knowledge is scientific peer-reviewed journals, and scientific article is considered the most convenient form. Publishing of research results is both working and ethical responsibility of the scientists.

The general principles of the scientific method are universal but their detailed application may differ depending on scientific discipline and circumstances. Therefore, many institutions and international associations (2-5) developed guidelines on responsible research and publication, to encourage and promote high ethical standards in the conduct of research and in biomedical publications. The general principals of guidelines are based on the rules of the good scientific practice (6). They are a set concerning various aspects of research process including publication practices and authorship determination. In general, the primary aim of the guidelines is not to codify a set of rules but to help in preventing scientific misconduct. Guidelines on good publication practice, issued in 2001 by Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), were found useful not only for authors and editors, but also for editorial board members, readers, owners of journals, and publishers. COPE's Guidelines address various aspects of research and publishing including authorship and duties of editors, and provide advice on dealing with any misconduct (5).

EDITORS' DUTIES

Editorial boards of the majority of biomedical journals follow the principles of good scientific practice and "Vancouver rules" are basis of their style and format (3).

Editors have many responsibilities: for the editorial content of the journal, for establishing the policies for authorship and submission of manuscripts to the journal, and for establishing a process of constructive and prompt evaluation of manuscripts. They are responsible to their readers and to authors, for maintaining integrity and confidentiality of their work during evaluation process. Editors should work to improve the quality of submitted manuscripts and be prepared to deal with errors and allegations of misbehavior i.e. scientific dishonesty and misuse of publication process (7,8).

In general, editors are responsible for the editorial policies of the journal and stand behind all decisions made by the members of editorial board. They must consider and balance the interests of many constituents - readers, authors, staff, owners, editorial board members, advertisers and the media (2).

It is a long way from submission of the manuscript to its publishing, and a publication process itself is very complex (9,10). Many persons are involved in the process of changing manuscript into scientific article, but the main role belongs to the editor (Figure 1). Editors are responsible not only for technical perfection but also for the following of ethical standards in all phases of publication process.

Therefore, editor's duties are numerous and the most important ones concern policies for:

- a. Authorship and communication with authors
- b. Submission and evaluation of manuscript
- c. Manuscript review and relation to reviewers

In this paper a core of editor - author relationship is briefly presented.

POLICIES FOR AUTHORSHIP AND SUBMISSION OF MANUSCRIPT

Editors should ensure as far as it is possible to publish reliable information (11). They must take some responsibility for the legitimacy of authorship of papers they publish. Clear standards for authorship have been published by some professional societies and associations of editors (Council of Biology

Editors -CBE, International Committee of medical Journal Editors-ICMJE)(3,11). The criteria of the CBE and ICMJE give responsibility for the published work the central place in their statements on authorship. Majority of the international scientific journals strictly adhered to the "Vancouver" criteria on authorship in accordance with good scientific practice (12,13). The journal policies for authorship and submission of manuscripts should be written and freely available.

Editors could decide on a number of authors per paper. They can also require that authors verify originality of the manuscript submitted for publication and to certify that coauthors have adequately participated in the work describing their individual contribution (authorship statement form) (8,11). When the manuscript was accepted, authors should be required to transfer copyright to the journal. If authors do not spontaneously declare to the editors any conflict of interest editors should actively ask to do that (14).

Editors should also establish policies regarding topics of research and types of articles considered for publication, format and length of manuscript, numbers of figures and tables allowed, and method of submission.

Each manuscript should have its own record containing identification number, and important dates - when it was received, reviewed, accepted/rejected, and published.

As soon as the manuscript was submitted the editors are obliged to

- * Check whether criteria for the submission of the manuscript were met
- * Inform authors that the manuscript was received and sent for evaluation quoting approximately time for the results of evaluation
- * Send the manuscript for peer review

The quality of journals rests, to a large degree, on the quality of peer review process. Peer review is a critical element in the editorial process of biomedical journals. The evaluation of manuscript is susceptible to various misconducts and majority of authors' complaints relate to peer review process (15,16). Therefore, editors must establish the process for the evaluation of manuscript. The main goals of a good peer review are to provide expert advice to the authors regarding the scientific validity of the data and methods, and help the editors in their decision about the suitability of the paper for publication (16). Editors may accept manuscripts without outside review if they find the subject is very important or timely. They also may reject the manuscript without outside review if the quality of the manuscript is poor, the subject matter is outside the purview of the journal, or criteria for the submission of the manuscript are not met.

EDITORIAL DECISION-MAKING AND COMMUNICATION WITH AUTHORS

Editors must establish a system for deciding on the fate of the manuscript: whether it will be accepted, accepted after appropriate revision or be rejected. Criteria for decision making include the reviewers' comments and recommendations, the availability of space, but the most important are the editor's judgment regarding the suitability of the manuscript for the journal and its value and interest for the readers (8). Editors' decision to accept or reject the manuscript submitted for publication relies mainly on the reviewer's comments and suggestions (17).

The editors always communicate their decisions to authors. They may provide explanations for the decision independently of the reviewer's comments. Additional problems may arise when a revision of the manuscript is sought. Generally, editors should actively encourage revision of the manuscripts. Sometimes the comments of the reviewers are contradictory. Then, editors should decide which comments are essential, may add their own suggestion for revision, and give advice to authors which comments should be followed. Potentially acceptable manuscripts that need major revision or additional data should be rejected. However, editors may suggest to authors to resubmit the manuscript. When this is done, editors should precisely explain how to make corrections of the manuscript to meet acceptance criteria, or as an alternative, editor may help the authors to improve manuscript to make it acceptable for publication. Revised manuscripts should be evaluated by the editors them-

selves and should not returned to reviewers or sent to new reviewers. Reasons for manuscript rejection may include scientific weakness, lack of originality, lack of importance and interest to readers or lack of space. Editors should consider appeals of authors regarding rejection of the manuscript only if authors provide a good explanation why decision may have been wrong, and if they are willing to revise the manuscript in response to reviewers' righteous comments. If the authors resubmit previously rejected but not revised manuscript, editor should immediately reject it. However, editor may agree to reconsider rejected manuscript. A revised manuscript should be evaluated by an original reviewer or be sent to one or two new reviewers. As an alternative, editor may consider the manuscript as a new one and send it to be reviewed by new reviewers. Editors should not make decisions on manuscripts about which they may have conflict of interest.

Besides the need to be trained for the editorial work, editors are also educators to their authors, reviewers and other collaborators (5,10,11,19). Recently established CSE Editors' Council Task Force (ECTF) has two key purposes: to provide journal editors at academic institutions with opportunities and resources for improving their journals, and to recruit editors for educational symposia that foster the principles of responsible conduct of research (4). All participants of the publishing process have the same goal - to publish a high quality science: they are collaborators on the same work (11). Each step of the publication process is prone to misuse, and therefore honest behavior of everyone in the process is obligatory. A high moral integrity of the editor guarantees that the whole process will be done in ethical way. WAME has established Ethics Committee with the aim to provide advise to editors on questions of good editorial practice. In the last few years a new institution - ombudsman of journal, has been introduced and recognized as a great help to editors on dealing with maladministration (scientific dishonesty and misuse) in editorial process (20,21).

CONCLUSION

Editors are responsible for the editorial policies of the journal and stand behind all decisions made by the members of editorial board. They are the "stewards of journals"(16) that provide direction for the journal and must consider and balance the interests of many participants. Following the principles of good publishing practice, they permanently improve editorial work and quality of journal and thus influence research standards in the field. However, the scientific publishing process is still very complex, which makes it susceptible to various misbehaviors. Therefore some authors suggest new policy for the editors of scientific journals that could introduce changes in publishing process: "editors should move away from their role as guardians of the scientific record being selective marketers of articles they believe are of interest to their readers" (18). A permanent education on responsible conduct of research and publishing process may help to improve the quality of research and scientific reporting.

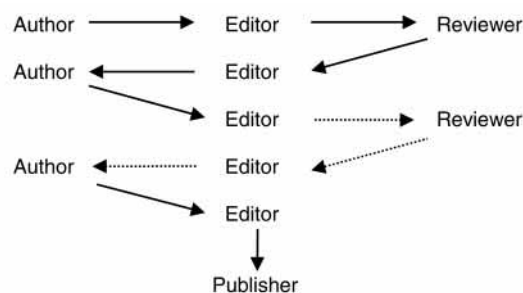


Figure 1. Publication process - author - editor - reviewer relationships (reproduced with permission. (Stom Glas S 2000;47:127-31))

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