

interview



Short biography of Faith McLellan

Faith McLellan is North American Senior Editor of *The Lancet* in New York City. She is a graduate of Wake Forest University and the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, where she took the PhD in the medical humanities (literature and medicine). Her dissertation was about narratives of illness patients and their families are writing on the Internet.

She has been a medical editor in two academic departments of anesthesiology and of the Physicians Information and Education Resource at the American College of Physicians in Philadelphia. She came to *The Lancet* after serving as Editorial Director of *Praxis Press*, the publishers of *Best Practice of Medicine* and *Praxis Post*, an online general-interest magazine for doctors. With Anne Hudson Jones, she is co-editor of *Ethics in Biomedical Publication* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). McLellan has served as co-chair of the UK's Committee on Publication Ethics Education Committee, and is a former director of the World Association of Medical Editors. She is international contributing editor of *Literature and Medicine*, and the immediate past president of the Council of Science Editors.

The Lancet editor on publication ethics

Interview with Faith McLellan on ethical aspects of scientific publishing

Are there standards, either written or unwritten, of ethical conduct of all three actors in the publishing game - authors, reviewers, and editors?

In the USA at least, the word "standards" has a specific legal definition. So professional organizations for editors have often shied away from formulating "standards"; instead, a number of associations and groups have issued policy statements, guidelines, and recommendations for the major parties concerned with scientific publication - authors, reviewers, and editors. Some years ago, a Council of Science Editors retreat attempted to delineate some of the responsibilities of these three groups. The attached document (Peer Review Guidelines: A Working Draft) details the proceedings. In addition, a number of other resources from the Council of Science Editors, the World Association of Medical Editors, and the UK's Committee on Publication Ethics, are available:

editorial guidance can be found at

<http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/services/policies.cfm>;

http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/events/retreat_paper_2005-02.pdf;

<http://www.wame.org/wamestmt.htm>;

<http://www.icmje.org>;

and <http://www.publicationethics.org.uk/guidelines>.

What is editorial policy for detecting and handling allegations of scientific misconduct?

Most medical journals do not have the resources or the expertise necessary to investigate allegations of scientific misconduct. In general, the first recourse is to ask the responsible author for an explanation, and if this request does not yield complete resolution, an authority at the author's institution, or the relevant funding agency, should be notified. The onus is then put on an authority who has the access and the responsibility to carry out a full

investigation. In cases of proven misconduct, journal editors then have options to issue expressions of concern or retraction. A useful guidance document, specifically created for editors dealing with allegations of scientific misconduct for authors who receive federal funding from the US government, but whose broader principles can be adapted for a number of different situations, is http://ori.dhhs.gov/documents/masm_2000.pdf.

Does, and how often, the serious editorial misconduct occur?

Serious editorial misconduct has doubtless occurred, but is less well documented than misconduct by authors. One source of potential information on the topic is the proceedings of the international Peer Review Congresses (see <http://www.ama-assn.org/public/peer/peer-home.htm>). The UK's Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has also attempted to address this gap in publication ethics practices by formulating a code of conduct for editors. See <http://www.publicationethics.org.uk/guidelines/code>.

Is peer review system also prone to abuse?

The same things that make the peer-review system inherently valuable - including generous and generally uncompensated review by experts - are the things that make it prone to abuse. Experts working in the same area, who are competing for funding, publication, and recognition, might be naturally expected to be tempted by the availability of private information that could be used for competitive advantage. The amazing thing is that the system works so well. It is basically a voluntary system, the basis of which is trust.

What does abusive coauthorship means? It seems that complains about unauthorized addition to or omission from a list of authors is the most common issue?

Abuses of coauthorship include the inclusion of people who don't qualify for authorship (guests), and the exclusion of legitimate authors (ghosts). Relationships marked by an imbalance of power, such as occur between students and teachers, can sometimes lead to difficulties in authorship determination. Papers arising from student theses and dissertations can be particularly problematic, as the involved research is likely to have taken place over a long period of time and may have involved sustained collaboration and many resources.

How to deal with editorial misconduct?

Editorial misconduct can be addressed in a number of ways. The first and most logical recourse is for the complainant to confront the editor directly. If this does not lead to a satisfactory resolution, other options include appealing to the journal's editorial board, publisher, or ombudsman. COPE also receives cases from authors, reviewers, and editors, and provides advice on some situations.

What to do in the aftermath of misconduct?

In the aftermath of proven scientific misconduct by authors, journal editors have a responsibility to correct the record, usually by issuing a notice of retraction of the relevant papers. Honest errors should be noted by corrections. In some cases, where there is concern about the validity of a paper but misconduct has not been proven, editors may choose to issue an "expression of concern". Details of these distinctions and recommendations for handling such cases can be found in the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals, by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (see www.icmje.org).

What penalty should be imposed on violators of publication ethics?

Those who violate publication ethics standards are subject to a variety of penalties. Proven cases of scientific misconduct may result in investigators being temporarily or permanently banned from receiving certain types of funding from various agencies; institutions may terminate or otherwise penalize such authors; and journals may retract authors' papers, ban them from publishing in the journal for defined or indefinite lengths of time, or stop using offending reviewers. Violations involving illegal activities are handled within the relevant legal system.

The journal *Lancet* was the very first medical journal that established the position of the Journal ombudsman. What is his role, and what is his experience?

The Lancet's ombudsman, in place since 1996, is charged with investigating complaints about editorial processes at the journal. He receives complaints about errors in the way papers are handled, investigates these, makes recommendations about ways to rectify the situation or improve our processes, and issues an annual summary report. The ombudsman's responsibilities are outlined below (taken from *The Lancet*, vol. 348, issue 9019, 6 July 1996, pages 5-6).

Panel. How can our ombudsman help you?

What our ombudsman can investigate:

- delays in handling submitted manuscripts or letters
- discourtesy
- failure to follow procedures outlined in "Writing for *The Lancet*"
- failure to take reasonable account of representations to us by authors and readers
- challenges to the publishing ethics of the journal - eg, accusations of editorial dishonesty, favouritism, victimisation, or conflicts of interest; matters of taste; and the editorial handling of complaints about author misconduct.

What our ombudsman cannot investigate

- complaints about the substance (rather than the process) of editorial decisions
- criticisms about editorial content
- accusations of scientific misconduct
- any complaint that has not first been submitted to the journal

Tell us something about cyberplagiarism.

The widespread availability of information on the Internet has made the plagiarist's job a good bit easier. With relatively effort, other people's text can be cut, pasted, and appropriated as the work of someone else. However, electronic tools have also eased the process of discovering instances of cyberplagiarism. Some publishers and journals use software specifically designed to search for strings of identical text, processes that sometimes lead to the discovery of plagiarism.

There is an initiative, launched recently in some of former Yugoslav republics, to call for an international action to help editors of scientific journals in these countries. Do you consider that such initiative is worthwhile and would you encourage your colleagues to take part?

An initiative to support editors in the former Yugoslav republics is, I think, a wonderful idea. One of the main problems for editors of scientific journals is that there is usually little training for such a job. New editors may find themselves floundering, facing situations for which they have little, if any, guidance. Support for editors might include pointing them to resources such as the ones I have listed in this interview, forming a "buddy system" with editors elsewhere, creating listservs and other electronic resources for these editors to talk to each other, and holding training sessions, workshops, and other meetings at which problems and solutions can be shared. Many of my editorial colleagues in the USA and the UK serve as resources, often informally, for individual editors or editorial groups in other geographic areas.

Is "Good publishing practice" just a batch of instructions, rules, guidelines and control mechanisms or much more than that? Can editors act as teachers to authors?

I believe quite strongly that editors have important roles to play as educators - for authors, reviewers, and all others involved in scientific publication. Many otherwise educated and accomplished scientists are not well versed in the conventions of good publication practices. It is our job as editors to spread the word.

Appendix:

Peer Review Guidelines: A Working Draft

CBE Peer Review Retreat Consensus Group

CBE Views 1995;18(5):79- 81.

CBE's first retreat, on the topic of peer review, was held 7-10 October 1994 at Airie House in Virginia. Participants hope these recommendations, the outcome of the weekend's discussion, evolve into guidelines for peer review that will be useful to journal editors, reviewers, authors, and readers.

Besides the larger function of conveying that peer review is not an arbitrary undertaking, these guidelines would: provide direction in peer-review processes for novice reviewers and editors, serve as a resource that established editors could cite as precedent for their decisions, provide a basis for editorial credibility (for example, in disputes or litigation), assist institutions starting new journals, inspire established journals to improve entrenched processes and systems, inform authors whose orientation is mainly commercial about processes applicable to publishing in both academic science and medicine, be useful in training sessions for peer reviewers.

Retreat participants proposed that CBE sponsor the development of general guidelines for peer review - though not "standards" - to include consideration of the retreat document, existing guidelines, and other available materials, such as the *Uniform Requirements*, the CBE style manual, and the scientific literature. After these general guidelines were developed, a draft copy for comment would be issued to the CBE membership and to other societies, boards, institutions, and individuals. Adoption of guidelines for peer review would take place after appropriate revision, with the suggestion that editors incorporate the guidelines as they see fit, for example, in instructions to authors, and that societies adapt them for their own disciplines. Likewise, CBE could establish a taxonomy of scientific disciplines and sponsor working groups to develop a different set of guidelines or criteria for each type of paper relevant to those disciplines.

A proposed format for the guidelines is a short booklet with sections corresponding to those in this document. The text would highlight the main questions and responses to them, give examples of breaches of ethics, and contain clear definitions of terms (for example, anonymity and confidentiality), particularly terms with legal ramifications. The guidelines would describe a range, rather than a narrow definition, of acceptable practices in peer review to provide help for authors, reviewers, editors, and readers.

Your input on this proposal is encouraged. Please address your comments to: Susan Eastwood, ELS(D), Department of Neurological Surgery, Box 0112, Rm M777, University of California San Francisco, San Francisco CA 94143-0112.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEER REVIEW

GENERAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF EDITORS AND PEER REVIEWERS TO AUTHORS

1. Have appropriate systems in place, with written policies that are fair and appear to be fair.
2. Ensure that the editor and reviewers are qualified for their roles in evaluating the paper.
3. As a reviewer, disclose conflicts of interest (sponsors, other journals, commercial interests, posts on other editorial boards or staffs, or paid consultancies), and potential for bias; editors must address and resolve these conflicts.
4. Preserve confidentiality, which is not restricted to the editor and reviewer, but extends to any colleague the reviewer may consult.
5. Do not allow the prestige of an author's institution to affect a review or the editorial decision based on a review.
6. Be honest, objective, fair, constructive, thorough, scholarly, confidential, courteous, and prompt.
7. Provide a balanced appraisal and constructive review that emphasizes originality and strengths of the paper, as well as weaknesses.
8. Evaluate the paper the authors have written, not the one the reviewer and editor believe they should have written.
9. Give guidance to improve the quality of the paper.

10. Be gracious and sensitive in communications to authors; do not make ad hominem attacks.

11. Substantiate criticisms.

12. Be alert to unethical editorial and review practices, whether inadvertent or overt (for example, when an editor or reviewer is in competition with the author, and when either is using the peer-review process to delay publication).

13. Make clear when a review is restricted to, or focused solely on, one aspect of the paper (for example, statistical review).

SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES OF EDITORS IN THE PEER-REVIEW PROCESS

(includes those items listed in Section 1; as well as the following)

A. To authors

1. Create a speedy and responsive editorial process.

2. Inform authors how the peer-review process works (for example, with written instructions, checklists, flow charts).

3. Develop clearly defined guidelines on confidentiality for reviewers.

4. Keep authors informed of delays in the process.

5. Ensure that communication is collegial and polite.

6. Ensure a fair and impartial review and processing of papers.

7. Shepherd authors through conflicting reviews; entertain well-substantiated rebuttals.

B. To peer reviewers

1. Give explicit instructions and statements of expectations regarding reviews.

2. Provide good communication and feedback (suggestions for improvement, but also letters of praise and thanks in tangible ways, with copies to officers at the reviewer's institution as appropriate).

3. Inform reviewers of the disposition of each paper they review.

4. Do not overburden good reviewers, but determine how many papers they can review and when; keep records of frequency of assignments.

5. Help reviewers to improve the quality of their reviews.

C. To readers

1. Encourage readers to communicate with the editor about aspects of the journal's content that appear to represent deficient or inadequate peer reviewing.

2. Respond to readers' letters and communications.

3. Be accessible to the media to provide accurate information and context.

D. To science

1. Learn enough about individual reviewers to determine who can provide the best review for each article.

2. Replace inadequate reviewers.

3. Define ethical standards for peer reviewing and editorial conduct in instructions to authors.

4. Strive to raise the ethical quality of peer review.

5. Keep abreast of current standards of peer review in science.

6. Discuss all suspicious aspects of peer reviewing with the journal's editorial board.

7. Recruit women and minorities to serve as reviewers.

SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES OF PEER REVIEWERS

(includes those items listed in Section 1 as well as the following)

A. To authors

1. Excuse yourself from serving as a peer reviewer when you are not qualified to review a paper or have, or might appear to have, a conflict of interest with the author.

2. Identify the need for additional experts early in the review process.

3. Realize that your role is as an advisor, not a decision maker.

4. Make reviews rigorous and detailed.

5. Document and justify criticisms.

6. Expand authors' horizons by placing the paper in the context of other literature.

7. Be sure that your comments to the editor are consistent with your critique of the paper.

8. Provide positive as well as negative feedback.

B. To editors

1. Adhere to the editor's instructions.

2. Inform the editor if you are not an expert in the field and recommend another reviewer, if possible.

3. Advise the editor if you have seen the data or paper earlier in some form (for example, previously reviewed it for a different journal); advise the editor of related fraud, plagiarism, duplicate publication, conflict of interest, or other problem.

4. Do not attempt to curry favor with authors.

5. Provide a rigorous, detailed evaluation and clear, direct, appropriate advice for the editor's use.

6. Ask permission before assigning the review to someone else or obtaining a supplemental or more specialized review, unless otherwise indicated by the editor.

7. Commit to spending adequate time to ensure thorough review or return the paper immediately.

8. Help the editor assess appropriateness of the paper for the journal.

9. Indicate whether the article is more appropriate for a different format or venue and whether all parts of the paper should be published.

10. Advise the editor whether the methods are sufficient to permit replication, in what ways they are deficient or possibly lacking a pivotal component, and whether they lack any other kinds of explicit information needed to judge the soundness of evidence presented in the paper.

11. Spot check the bibliography for accuracy of citation, quotation, and interpretation, for adequate attribution of ideas, and possible duplicate publication.

12. Make a straightforward recommendation about publication to the editor.

13. Advise the editor of the potential impact of controversial findings. For example, if a study shows that drug X causes cancer, to publish without comment would be risky; the peer reviewer should give the editor an idea of the degree of risk and advise the editor how the risk might be handled.

14. Recommend when editorial commentary is appropriate.

15. Be able to provide documentation or references related to comments, if necessary.

C. To readers

1. Act as a surrogate for the readership with regard to a paper's qualities: interest, pertinence, importance, accuracy, and ethical values.

2. Improve clarity.

3. Avoid misinformation.

4. Ensure that the paper provides sufficient details regarding methods and materials.

D. To science

1. Recognize the moral obligation, duty, and responsibility to serve as a peer reviewer in support of the reliability and utility of the scientific literature.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF EDITORS AND PEER REVIEWERS TO INSTITUTIONS

1. As editors, preserve the reputation of the journal's parent institution or association while maintaining editorial integrity.

2. As peer reviewers, serve responsibly so as to support your institutions' reputation for excellence.

Organizers of CBE's first retreat, the "CBE Retreat on Peer Review", were Susan Eastwood, CBE Education Committee Chair; Christy Wright, Program Director; and Faith McLellan, Program Coordinator. Resource faculty were Monica Bradford, Bruce Dancik, Edward Huth, Stephen Lock, and Drummond Rennie.

Lilijana Vučković-Dekić