

PUBLICATION ETHICS: GLOBAL ISSUE, REGIONAL CHALLENGES

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Publication ethics is central to academic publishing. Publication ethics is an umbrella term encompassing all ethical issues related to scientific publication, ranging from research misconducts such as duplicate publication and guest authorship to research frauds such as data fabrication and plagiarism.¹⁻³ Contrary to the common notion, it is not only the duty of the authors to abide by the guiding principles of publication ethics but responsibility also lies with the authors; editors; reviewers; and publishers, for the appropriate handling of scientific data and should adhere to ethical guidelines of academic research.⁴ Since ethics is a decision making tool for any course of action and is thus the requirement for human life, it is also a fundamental aspect of research and publication because ignoring it affects the integrity of research, wastes funds and resources, and harms the research community by damaging the reputation of researchers, editors, and institutions.^{5,6} Moreover, the participants, the general public and the policy makers may be harmed by fraudulent published material that would later change public policies.⁷⁻⁹

The last few decades have seen an increase in the number of institutions, academicians and researchers around the globe. This has led to recent advancements in knowledge, but has also posed an extra pressure to produce more knowledge. These academicians and researchers also require scientific publications to promote their academic careers.¹⁰ This has indirectly paved the path for more sophisticated misconducts in scientific disciplines and we are recent-

ly observing a number of such instances.¹¹ In this context, it is important to remember that incidence of sophisticated misconducts are directly proportional to the awareness of publication ethics. Those less aware, still commit basic misconducts which are mostly seen in developing countries.

In developed countries, the concept of publication ethics has led to the establishment of organizations and institutions that set and promote ethical research standards as well as provide advice for researchers and editors to adhere to ethical guidelines.¹²⁻¹⁷ Journals also have clear ethical standards stated in their "Instruction to Authors". However, in developing countries the situation is entirely different. In these countries, while academicians (who might also be researchers) are striving to promote themselves and their institutions and keep up with the rapid global advancements in their research field, publication ethics, may sometimes get neglected amid endeavors for higher research production. Moreover, researchers and at times editors in developing countries are often unaware of such ethical standards and guidelines as well as related organizations that could potentially offer advice on publication ethics, despite the surge in the budding of more and more journals in these countries.¹⁸ The results of a study of editors from 183 Medline indexed journals revealed that the editors of the journals who had enough knowledge of their editorial work were poorly informed on topics related to ethics such as authorship, conflict of interest and plagiarism.¹⁸

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In this context, both national and regional associations of medical editors can play a vital role. They can organize workshops, seminars, courses and conferences specifically on ethical issues related to scientific publication. These can be beneficial for the authors, reviewers, publishers as well as for the editors. Such events have been organized successfully, to address ethical challenges that are faced by the whole research community.^{10,19,20}

For authors, the organization of courses for improvement in the proficiency in English writing can be useful since the authors from non-English speaking countries often complain of their shortcomings in appropriately phrasing their expression without crossing the boundaries of publication ethics.²¹ Professional medical writers can also play their role to help such authors but a careful look at the conduct may be required and the internationally made guidelines need to be pragmatically implemented in this region.²²⁻²⁴

For Editors, there can be some solutions to the ethical dilemmas, they face.²⁵ Train the Trainer programs, investing in editors to disseminate the knowledge related to publications and related ethical issues have been useful.^{26,27} A two year diploma course in Medical Journalism, running in Shiraz University of Medical

Sciences is another unique and successful example of promoting awareness of Publication Ethics.²⁸ Another opening for editors to improve their skills in all aspects of their job as an editor including their knowledge and practice of dealing with publication ethics is to create prospects of internship with reputed national and international journals.^{29,30} All these methods have been successfully used in the past and can be used regularly. Reviewers and publishers can also benefit from these opportunities.

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), a non-profit organization spearheading publication ethics was established in 1997 by a group of medical editors, is run through a council by a diverse group of editors from different countries including members from our region.³¹ COPE provides advice to editors and publishers on various aspects of publication ethics and provide resources including guidelines (and flowcharts) for handling different research misconducts and fraud, and educates editors through its newly launched e-learning course.¹³ It also funds research on publication ethics. COPE plays a key role in promoting publication ethics through its forums, seminars and congresses which are sometimes organized in collaboration with institutions in different countries.¹³ Such events are highly influential in promoting ethical standards among regional editors and researchers. Moreover, these events provide an opportunity for regional editors to unite in an academic setting and communicate and share their knowledge and experience regarding various challenges pertaining to publication ethics, with other colleagues.

The second international congress on publication ethics will be held in Shiraz, Iran, on 4-5 December 2014, following the success of the first congress which was held in Shiraz in November 2011.³² The congress will be hosted by Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, which is Iran's leading university in publication ethics. The theme of this year's congress will be "Implementing Ethics in Scientific Publication" and the conference will in-

clude various topics related to publication ethics such as authorship criteria, plagiarism, data fabrication, ethical standards for editors, ethics education, etc. The congress will also include various panel discussions for enabling mutual communication and sharing of experiences between editors. It is hoped that such regional congresses would lead to higher awareness on publication ethics and future regional policymaking for the better implementation of publication ethics in regional academic setting.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare no conflict of interest

GRANT SUPPORT AND FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

NIL

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