Editorial Independence is Dead, Long Live Editorial Independence

Principles, Compliance, and Recommendations

*Kamaldeep Bhui, Dept of Psychiatry, Nuffield Dept of Primary Care Health Sciences, Wadham College, University of Oxford. Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust. East London NHS Foundation Trust, World Psychiatric Association Collaborating Centre, Oxford UK.

Aileen O'Brien, Reader in Psychiatry & Education, Dean for Students, St. George's University of London.

Rachel Upthegrove, Institute for Mental Health, University of Birmingham, Birmingham Early Intervention Service, Birmingham Women's and Children's NHS Foundation Trust.

Alexander C. Tsai, Center for Global Health and Mongan Institute, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts USA; Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, USA; Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

Mustafa Soomro, Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust, Hampshire, UK

Giles Newton Howes, Dept of Psychiatry, University of Otago. Wellington

Matthew R. Broome, Institute for Mental Health, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; Birmingham Women's and Children's NHS Foundation Trust, Birmingham, UK; Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.

Andrew Forrester, Department of Psychological Medicine and Clinical Neursciences, School of Medicine, Cardiff University, Haydn Ellis Building, Maindy Road, Cathays, Cardiff CF24 4HQ

Patricia Casey, Hermiage Medical Clinic, Dublin. Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry, University College Dublin.

Anne Doherty, School of Medicine, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland.

William Lee , Cornwall NHS Foundation Trust, Cornwall, UK.

Kenneth Kaufman,

Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA. Department of Psychological Medicine at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London, UK.

Corresponding author: kam.bhui@psych.ox.ac.uk

Science & Research Integrity

Science and clinical practice requires high quality evidence on which to build a better world and society, from investigating how to reduce lung cancer, prevent road traffic accidents and associated injuries, and of relevance to The British Journal of Psychiatry: how to prevent mental illness, support people with mental health problems, and create enduring policies for their wellbeing. Psychiatric research lacks the investment seen in other medical specialities and is subject to much contention from those seeking to reject notions of mental illness, seemingly sensing only oppressive forces at play. This is because, they argue, mental illnesses are not caused by a single pathological finding that is easily identified on a test and remedied with simple treatment; we know that environmental, social, cultural, psychological and biological affordances all interact. Poverty, inequalities, racism, trauma are all of relevance, yet such causes might also be cast as political and outside the realms of biomedicine, health care policy and practice. However, dealing with such a varied and complex aetiological structure makes psychiatry the speciality it is. We must combat political ideologies and opinion with evidence. This makes the scientific task of journal editors and editorial boards more challenging, and not least because interdisciplinary , socio-cultural and political dialogue is necessary, and may require compromise. All must uphold the principles of research integrity in partnership and trust: editorial boards, authors, peer reviewers, readers, and consumers of research who use the findings to improve policy and practice. Together we must ensure the best quality evidence is published, so it can be used to build preventive and interventionist forms of care.

All these efforts are grounded in the expertise and scholarship of the editorial board members who span disciplines, institutions and countries. At The BJPsych and related portfolio of journals, we have taken many actions to protect and promote research integrity and to live up to the highest standards of publication ethics.[1 2] Sometimes these actions follow new best practices guidance more generally, such as trial pre-registration or PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews; on other occasions, we received complaints and improved our policies and practice as a result. In addition, we are actively trying to tackle gender and race disparities in the literature (there is an open call for such papers).

We now insist on pre-registration of reviews and trials, and other types of studies where possible. Declaration of conflicts of interest by authors and handling editors shape who sees the submissions. A series of checks on submission is followed by scrutiny by deputy editors, handling editors, and final decisions are made by handling, deputy and editor in chief. Along with peer review, we seek to safeguard against errors. We established a research integrity group to develop best practice, strategy and policy.[2] We are fortunate also to be partnered with Cambridge University Press and receive their guidance on ethical conduct of editorial practice and publishing.[3]

Our responsibilities are to patients, the readership, the wider public, and to always act in the public interest. We also consider the needs of scholarly societies including our own, funding bodies, and ultimately professional regulators like the General Medical Council. We follow the editorial guidelines of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), International Committee on Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), and our own respective governance structures including editorial boards and a Publications Management Board, which reports to the most senior leaders of the journal owner, including the officers who are also College Trustees.

Editorial Independence

A central tenet of research integrity, publication ethics, and editorial practice, is editorial independence. This is a non-negotiable and fundamental cornerstone of all scientific journals, seeking to prevent influence from journal owners or from interest groups.[4] This places full responsibility for advancing scientific debate on the Editor in Chief and respective editorial board members, alongside those directly involved in assessing each submission. The guidelines by the various bodies outlined, make clear this is paramount, and journal owners should provide the conditions for editorial independence (see Table 1).

Owners may hire and fire editors, and from a distance be satisfied that appropriate editorial policies are in place. They should not however make editorial decisions, or seek to influence editorial decisions, and publishing must not prioritise financial over ethical interests. These principles are the oxygen of editorial practice, and editors work hard to uphold them, working with reviewers, boards, authors and public commentators under an unspoken

contract of trust in editorial equipoise and authority. Our role is to find and present the best research for public scrutiny, peer review, and scientific critique, not to take a specific political or policy position.

Editorial boards may be conversant with these principles and practices as a daily experience. Governance structures should be mutually agreed, but journal owners may not fully appreciate hard won scientific red lines if focused on avoidance of cost or legal threat rather than scientific integrity. The publishing industry is rapidly changing, moving to online platforms, with pressures to publish as a commercial model leading to a proliferation of what have been called pirate or predatory journals. Such journal owners or publishers may seek to influence editorial policies or have none, purely to maximise income, under the guise that "the more data that is published the better", rather than "we need better data and more carefully designed research, with greater quality controls and checks on sources of bias and confounding".[5] The Web of Science has resorted to delisting as many as 82 journals in March of 2023, raising concerns about the quality and motivations of these journals owners. Flawed research designs, unclear search strategies, selective reporting, outcome switching, and failure to replicate are commonly seen, although blatant data fabrication we believe is less common. Many errors are picked up not at the time of publication but much later. Scientific knowledge is contextual. Dismissing "old" research entirely based on modern standards may overlook the incremental contributions that were the foundation for subsequent advancements. Retracting seminal papers because they don't meet current academic criteria could entirely negate the importance of their input into their respective field at the time. There is a fine balance. Older papers can be legitimately appraised taking account of the contemporaneous historical practices; however, if found to be flawed in some fundamental scientific way, removal from the scientific record is appropriate.

The famous retractions and expressions of concerns about Hans Eysenck's research publications,[6] the discredited feigning of symptoms study of Rosehan (remains unretracted)[7], and corrections and retractions in the BJPsych,[1 8] as well as the infamous eventual retraction of a paper on MMR vaccinations[9] suggest that relevance, dependability, and validity are the drivers of retractions. Too much published research is unsound: 25

percent of randomized trials, and about 10 percent of large-scale randomized trials suffer from significant flaws.[10] About 2% of researchers admit to falsification of data and 34% had questionable practices.[11] In a Nuffield Foundation for Bioethics study, 26% of researchers are tempted or feel under pressure to falsify data.[12] There will be many badly designed and uncited papers, going back decades, in many journals. Arguably this is a consequentialist stand, but there are no or few requests for correction or retraction of uninfluential or uncited papers. For example, the recent COVID pandemic saw a large number of submission, processed rapidly, and many retracted by May of 2023, with retracted papers being most cited.[13] [14]

Retraction Watch is a non-profit organisation that monitors retractions, reporting trends in the industry as well as hot-spots. This public scrutiny, along with courageous scientists, provides a form of self-regulation. Corrections and retractions appear to challenge trust in science but eventually such honest and explicit actions should improve it, and must be carefully considered by the Editor in Chief, who in accord with guidance, has the final say. We believe corrections and retractions should not be stigmatised but are part of the contract between authors, editors, readers, and the wider group of stakeholders. All work in trust to correct the scientific record.[15]

Threats to EI

Some argue that membership of COPE is not enough if members are violating those principles, and there are no powers to expel, or enforce compliance, nor powers through national legislation.[16] Indeed, there is no regulation or process for removing journals or host societies. Some larger publishers take charge of complaints, calls for retractions, and any legal threats to the publisher or owner, rather than this being an editorial responsibility, as outlined in the guidance from COPE, WAME, and ICMJE. This risks non-scientific interests playing out and becoming the basis for decisions.

Despite the guidance, the reality is not always so rosy. There are examples of the principles represented in guidance being ignored. For example, an owner and member society tried to influence editorial decision making, and the wording of a retraction and of subsequent

correspondence which criticised the owner's position.[17] WAME guidance encourages editors to make public any violations of publication ethics:

> 'Editors should resist any actions that might compromise these principles in their journals, even if it places their own position at stake. If major transgressions do occur, editors should participate in drawing them to the attention of the international medical community.'

However, this can be challenging if an owner removes editors or does not support and disrupts the execution of decisions whilst not removing them. This becomes especially difficult if there are legal challenges to editorial independence, as negotiated settlements to avoid costly litigation processes by an owner may deter transparency and debate. There are pilots in Sweden where the courts decide what is or is not retracted, rather than journal owners. This expensive legal proposal cannot replace the scientific scrutiny, but may weaken scientific judgement as the basis of what is and is not accepted or retracted, and becomes open to political influences, not least financial vested interests. Only those with the most resources are likely to resort to the courts.

A very recent but alarming trend is the strategic use of legal threat to control the dissemination of public opinion, journalism, and scientific findings.[18] [19] [20] [21] This is of particular concern as it spreads into scientific arenas, because the relationship between an author and editor has to be one of mutual respect and trust, not one that includes legal threats and intimidation intended to influence editorial decisions. Editorial decisions are formed by experience and judgement and academic rigor, held to account by peers and public scrutiny. There are examples of companies fearing loss of income or threats to their business due to scientific critique so they threaten litigation, on grounds of defamation.[22] Legal threats (for example, in response to proposed expressions of concern or potential retraction) made by individual authors have also been reported. The industry standards are not designed, however, to operate in such an environment. We need better guidance to deter legal threats designed to intimidate and influence editorial decisions; for example, legal threats could be posted on the journal website to ensure such threats are in the public domain.[21]

When there are complaints or allegations of error, it is imperative the editor and author can discuss the detail and potential remedies, like corrections, data-re-analysis, or just the wording of the findings, long before retraction is considered necessary. Even when retraction is necessary, we seek to do so on mutual agreement, explaining the grounds, and seeking a shared statement of retraction whenever possible. Sometimes authors request retraction as they discovered an error in data gathering or processing. A mutually satisfactory decision to retract may not be possible if authors are objecting or vehemently disagree, or resort to legal threat from the start, so blocking any meaningful dialogue about the science. The most important ingredient for research integrity has to be ethical leadership and 'character' of all actors to ensure there is an uncompromising insistence on meeting the highest standards of ethical research conduct, reporting, and publication.[23]

Table 1: Editorial Independence: guidance and protections

Staff and material resources for the running of the journal should be the responsibility of the owner. There should be adequate resources to ensure research integrity and ethics and the smooth publication schedules.

Editors need the full conditions in which editorial independence can operate, including resources, indemnity and commensurate insurance to guarantee appropriate ethical actions.

All decisions about submission, peer review, acceptance or rejection, correction, or retraction should be made by the Editor in Chief.

All editorial decisions about content and complaints must be made by editors. Staff operating on editorial matters, need to protect confidentiality, and the integrity of editorial decisions, and independence of these from the journal owner.

If disputes are encountered between authors and editors, independent legal advice and indemnity are essential, and owners should support rather than disrupt based on financial or policy views.

If there is disagreement between editors and owners once editorial decisions are made, a specific agreed process needs to be followed. This should include agreement on membership and terms of reference for any arbitration process. A legal chair is advisable.

If there is conflict between editorial and owner positions, independent legal advice should be available to both parties reflecting their respective values and positions.

Compromises and breaches of editorial independence should be made transparent and published.

Recommendations

- We need regulation and a register of breaches and more careful scrutiny of members of COPE and WAME to expose weaknesses, learn lessons, and provide regulatory systems and shared legal advice on issues of common and public interest.
- All journal owners should be assessed for compliance, competence, and capacity, perhaps through inspection and training.
- Continuing professional development and training for editorial practice should sit alongside such measures.
- Journal owners unable to live up to the expectations of scientific good practice, research integrity and publication ethics should desist remaining the journal owner.
- Journal editors should ensure such standards are maintained, and if required, in accord with WAME guidance, alert the wider industry to violations.
- The findings of research that impact on the public and patients should be better governanced through appropriate appraisal processes, perhaps by regulators with specialist knowledge of editing and publication. Could universities extend their roles to undertake appraisal of editors and responsible officers of journal owners to assess competence and capacity?
- Organisational responsible officers, should require commensurate accreditations to serve in such roles. Employers of authors already take some responsibility for assurance and indemnity, this should be extended to editorial roles for learned societies.

Declarations: The authors include the Editor in Chief, Deputy Editors, Senior Editorial Board Committee members, and members of the Research Integrity Group. None of the authors played any part the decision making process.

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