Editorial misconduct in biomedical journals - the role of an Ombudsman

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Why worry about editorial misconduct?

- There is hardly any researcher who has no grievance against an editor
- Editorship confers ‘authority’ with little accountability, at least towards authors
- Editorial offices excessively secretive about its functions
- Channels of communication with authors weak
- Few authors willing to take on editors
What is editorial misconduct?

- Deliberate and avoidable delay in reviewing a manuscript
- Unacceptable behaviour
- Bias in review
- Stonewalling
- Rejection without assigning any reason
- Cheating
Some existing mechanisms of redressal

- Write a letter to editor
- Complain to Editorial Board members
- Complain to publisher/society
- Complain to owners of the journal
- Appeal to Director/Director-General
- In reality, few authors take on editors!
What are the issues?

- Lack of openness and transparency in dealing with authors
- Editorial policies not spelt out
- Problems with peer review
- Excessive secrecy of editorial office
- Avoidable mistrust between authors and editors
- Editors’ indifference towards authors
What could be done?

• Improve communication between authors and editors
• Adapt a policy of transparency of editorial functions
• Set up a system of redressal of grievances of authors
• Ombudsman?
Role of Ombudsman

- Investigates ‘maladministration (that) has led to injustice’
- Avoidable delay
- Failure to give appropriate advice when asked
- Discourtesy or harassment
- Failure to take account of representations
- Mistakes in the handling of claims
Ombudsman

• *The Lancet* the first medical journal to set establish this position in 1996
• *Indian Journal of Pharmacology* the first Indian journal to do so. Not just the first in India and the developing world but among the very few medical journals in the world.
Case study I

- Author submits a paper to a journal
- The paper sent to three reviewers
- One reviewer fails to respond despite reminders
- Finally decision taken to publish the paper based on peer review
- Author informed that paper is scheduled for publication
Case study I (contd)

• Just when the proofs were about to be sent, the Author frantically calls up the editorial office that his paper has already appeared in another journal!

• Apparently, the non-responding reviewer who edits his own journal decides to publish the paper

• Action taken?
Case study II

• A research project initiated by five scientists from three departments of a medical college
• Preliminary results presented at a conference with names of all the authors
• Final paper sent to a journal with one name deleted.
• The paper gets published
Case study II (contd)

• The aggrieved author contacts his other co-investigators
• They admit error and write to the editor to make amends along with the aggrieved author
• The editor refuses any change in authorship citing Vancouver (ICMJE) Guidelines on authorship!
Case study III

- A letter to editor sent to IJP criticizing a paper already published
- The paper being criticized was published when two of the three authors were members of the journals as sectional editors
- The editor refused to entertain the Letter saying that the two authors were part of the team that took the decision to publish the paper and thus there is a conflict of interest
Case study III (contd)

• The editor feels that editorial content is the collective responsibility of the editorial team (staff)
• The authors claimed that they were in any case not part of decision making of this paper
• This issue referred to Ombudsman
• I opined that the authors have freedom to criticize the paper and that the Letter should be published on its merit, subject to peer evaluation
• The Letter was reviewed and subsequently published
Case study IV

• A letter to editor was sent to the journal commenting on an editorial published

• Letter accepted for publication and the author informed

• Letter slated to appear along with response of the section editor who wrote the editorial

• When proofs were sent, author objects to some editorial changes claiming that the meaning of the Letter was seriously distorted
Case study IV (Contd)

- Editor maintained that contents could be edited before publication and that the changes made did not distort the message.
- The author appeals to the Ombudsman.
- I opined that the changes carried out did not distort the message and the editor was within his rights to edit manuscript to suit the Journal’s requirement.
- The Letter was published in its modified form.
The future

• Promotion of awareness of rights of authors
• Make journals follow policies or more openness in processing of manuscripts
• Debate issues about editorial accountability in Society meetings
• Support a movement to establish systems of editorial accountability in Indian journals
Thank you