

## EDITORIAL

### WRITING FOR PUBLICATION: ETHICAL ISSUES

Publishing scientific knowledge began more than 350 years ago with The Royal Society of London. This international society was chartered by King Charles of England in 1662 and in 1665 published one of the first scientific journals, *Philosophical Transactions*.<sup>1</sup> Today there are thousands of scientific journals available to provide us with information on topics from basic to applied sciences. In medicine, nursing and healthcare oriented journals we look to the content of articles we read to improve our practice or understanding of diseases and patient care. Thus, we expect accuracy of content. To assist with ensuring this accuracy we have a peer review process whereby manuscripts submitted to journals are assessed for content by experts in the field.

#### **Establishing standards in publishing**

In 1978, a group of medical journal editors met in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada to develop guidelines for formatting manuscript for their journals. This group began by addressing citations and methods for referencing journal articles, book chapters and newspaper articles.<sup>2</sup> Over the years this prestigious group has expanded its scope to include ethics in publication and is now the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). The group meets annually and revisions to the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals.

In 1997, a group of editors met informally in the United Kingdom to discuss concerns over scientific misconduct. This group formalized and is now the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). In 1999, COPE issued Guidelines on Good Publication Practice that address study design, authorship, peer review process, redundant publication, duties of editors and guidelines for managing misconduct.<sup>3</sup> Guidelines from ICMJE and COPE will be used to discuss ethical issues in publication.

#### **Peer review**

Peer review is utilized by scientific journals to maintain standards by improving quality, accuracy, readability, and credibility of the content for readers. Peer reviewers are selected by journals based on their expertise in content areas and their experience with the publishing process. Advice given to authors by peer reviewers and editors set the standards of the discipline.<sup>4</sup> Many journals continue to use a double blinding process whereas the authors and reviewers are not identified to one another. More than 90% of peer reviewers surveyed in nursing journals continue to prefer the double blinding process and think it contributes to the quality of manuscripts published.<sup>5</sup> Over the years the peer review process has identified ethical concerns about research integrity, human subjects' protection, privacy, authorship, conflicts of interest and plagiarism. These issues are brought to the editor for thoughtful consideration, deliberation and potential action since they can seriously impact the authors, scientific integrity, the journal and the discipline.

Peer review assists the editor in determining the most suitable manuscripts to be published. It is not unusual for peer reviewers to provide varying opinions of the same manuscript. Peer reviewers are selected for their expertise on a topic or their expertise on research methods. The two reviewers may disagree based on their perspectives in reviewing the manuscript. While the content may be accurately perceived, the methods may be flawed for reaching conclusions expressed. The editor must evaluate the

varying opinions and make decisions on how to proceed. Discussions with the peer reviewers may help in making final recommendations to the authors. While suggestions from reviewers are useful to editors, they are suggestions and editors are under no obligation to abide by these recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

## **Authorship**

Authorship can be a delicate decision as manuscripts are developed and submitted for publication. From my perspective authorship should be decided at the onset of discussions in manuscript preparation. This can alleviate many problems as authors proceed with the process. ICMJE defines authors as those who have made substantive contributions to concept, design, data analysis, actual composition of the manuscript as well as final approval of the final version to be published.<sup>6</sup> Determining first author is a very important first step in developing a manuscript since this author often assumes a leadership role in guiding the paper to submission and through the process of developing revision requests. To avoid disputes it is advisable to make these decisions regarding authorship early in the process of manuscript development.<sup>3</sup>

Contributors to the manuscript who do not meet the requirements for authorship may be acknowledged at the end of the manuscript. Contributors may include those who provided technical assistance or a department chair who provided time and support for writing the document.<sup>6</sup> These individuals did not participate in the planning or writing of the manuscript and therefore, should be acknowledged.

## **Human subjects protection, privacy and confidentiality**

Since most medical and nursing journals address patient care issues it is important to ensure protection of patient rights and privacy. Informed consent should be obtained prior to disclosing any identifiable medical information in a case report. Patient names, initials or photographs should not be used unless the patient, family or guardian has signed a written informed consent agreement specifically for publication of the information.<sup>2</sup> This written consent should be maintained by the authors as well as by the journal. Written informed consent should be indicated in the published article and many journals now require this to protect the privacy of individuals. When informed consent is not able to be obtained, the institution's ethics committee should review the manuscript to determine if it is ethically acceptable.<sup>3</sup> Many journal editors will request an institutional ethics approval if a signed informed consent is not available.

Most scientific journals require a statement in the body of the manuscript that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Ethics Committee has approved research involving human subjects or animals. The Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) has issued a checklist for authors submitting results of randomized controlled trials. This checklist also addresses protection of human subjects. Journals are asked to endorse the CONSORT statement. In doing so, authors are asked to follow the CONSORT guidelines as they develop a manuscript for a randomized controlled study.<sup>7</sup>

## **Conflict of interest**

Authors are responsible for reporting any financial or personal relationships that may bias their publication.<sup>6</sup> This is usually requested by editors and publishers and should be included on the title page of the submitted manuscript. Funding sources for the research or manuscript development should also be reported. These disclosures increase public trust and credibility in the peer review process and scientific publication through transparency.<sup>6</sup>

## **Discussion**

While publishing in a peer reviewed scientific journal may have become more complex over the years, the process has also become more reliable. When we alter our practice based on published reports, we must know that the science is sound and that ethical considerations have been carefully reviewed.

Authorship has long presented us with potential disputes among those who wish to publish their work. Guidelines as produced by consensus groups such as ICMJE, COPE and CONSORT provide us with clearly defined processes to enhance the publication of papers that meet standards for ethics and sound research. Journals that support these efforts will succeed in producing reports that are valued and accepted by clinicians as well as by the authors who produce the work. Abiding by these ethical standards increases our credibility through published contributions that guide patient care.

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