Consortium of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery Journals to Collaborate in Maintenance of High Ethical Standards

The editors-in-chief of major medical journals in our specialty have reached an agreement intended to uphold high standards of ethical behavior on the part of our contributing authors. Although it represents only a tiny fraction of our submissions, each year we encounter significant numbers of ethical lapses, sometimes minor, but occasionally serious in nature. These include plagiarism, duplicate publication [1–5] undisclosed conflicts of interest [6, 7] inappropriate authorship [8, 9] breaches in ethical research conduct including informed consent, and even outright scientific fraud. Heretofore, it was possible for an author who has engaged in unethical practices to simply resubmit his or her work to another specialty journal where the questionable practices might go undetected.

One of the easiest problems to identify is duplicate publications, which are not uncommon in peer-reviewed medical publications [1–4]. A recent analysis has recognized six distinct duplication patterns: (1) identical samples and identical outcomes; (2) two or more articles assembled to make up another article; (3) identical samples and different outcomes; (4) increasing samples and identical outcomes; (5) decreasing samples and identical outcomes, and (6) different samples and different outcomes

from the main article [1]. The percentage of duplicate publications has been estimated to be 8.3% in anesthesia and analgesia articles [1] and 8.5% in otolaryngology articles [2]. A large majority of these articles are published within 1 year of the index or main article, and they often do not reference the original article [1, 2].

Plagiarism is another problem that is encountered occasionally in peer-reviewed journals. Although it is rare for a full article to be plagiarized, it can occur at times when an article is translated to another language, particularly in small or nonindexed journals. There are times when authors are confused about what is or is not acceptable regarding how much of someone else's work can be used without permission. Fortunately, many of these issues can be addressed by using recommendations from the US Copyright Office [10]. Although 'There are no legal rules permitting the use of a specific number of words ...' [10], the person considering using the work should take into consideration the 'amount and substantiality of the portion used in relationship to the copyrighted work as a whole' [11].

There has been great interest on the part of the editors of the otolaryngology – head and neck surgery journals in the United States in developing appropriate guidelines and criteria for authors regarding duplicate publications and plagiarism. General guidelines have been recognized in the 'Instructions to Authors' of the journals. Although there may be specific instances in which it may be difficult for authors to determine whether their report is duplicative according to the criteria above, or in which there is

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a question about what can be considered plagiarism rather than referencing, most occurrences have been obvious. In some cases such activities are egregious in their scope and intent. If an author is unsure about these issues, he or she can refer to the articles cited above, or consult the editor of the journal to which the article is submitted.

Important areas of concern for us have been patient confidentiality and informed consent. The Hippocratic Oath requires that physicians protect the confidentiality of their patients. In the United States, patient confidentiality is law. It is essential that scientific publications respect patient confidentiality. Published information must be de-identified to ensure that the patient's rights are respected. This is also true of photographs and other images.

The physician has ethical obligations in human experimentation. All manuscripts submitted for consideration for publication must respect these principles. Clinical trials and experimental therapies must be peer-reviewed and approved by an institutional review committee before implementation. Manuscripts describing these clinical research projects require an indication of appropriate oversight.

An issue that has become apparent in the medical peer-reviewed literature is that there are no well-established policies to deal with authors who are grossly faulty of breaches in research and publication ethics. We, the editors of the otolaryngology – head and neck surgery journals in the United States, feel that these issues are substantive within our literature and that such breaches do occur. This is particularly true for duplicate publications and plagiarism, which do occur. Although often more difficult to identify, undisclosed conflicts of interest, inappropriate authorship, breaches in ethical research conduct, and outright scientific fraud may also be identified.

Our group has agreed to implement two policies to better coordinate our response to serious lapses in publication ethics. First, we will share information through a notification system whereby all journals are informed of relevant incidents. Second, in particularly egregious cases, our group (after an appropriate deliberative process) may elect to limit an author's privilege to publish in our journals for a specified period of time. It is important to emphasize that this system is designed to respond only to ethical breaches that are of a troubling magnitude, not minor oversights. It is also designed to create an ethical environment in our journals that will act as a standard in medical peer-reviewed publishing. It is hoped that these measures, together with educational features and editorial published in our pages, will help to foster the highest possible standard of ethical practices.

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