My Crash Course in Publication Ethics
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Like many nurse editors, I assumed that authors and reviewers for nursing journals were always acting ethically. I had been an editor for about seven years before my illusions were shattered. I was contacted by an editor of a medical journal who forwarded an email from a physician claiming my journal had published an article by a nurse author more than 11 years earlier that was nearly a verbatim copy of an article previously published by the complaining physician. I was not the editor of the journal at that time, nor was the publisher the same as the current publisher; nonetheless, editors and publishers assume the liabilities of what has occurred prior to their tenure on a scholarly journal. You might wonder how plagiarism in such an old article had been uncovered and why that even matters.

To answer the first question, the duplication was uncovered by a third party researcher who was conducting a systematic review of the literature on a topic and both articles appeared in her pile of articles for possible inclusion in the review. She read both and wondered if she had mistakenly pulled one article twice. She made a side-by-side comparison of the articles and found more than 85% verbatim duplication of content. Based on the publication dates of the articles, she determined that the one authored by the physician and published in a medical journal was the primary article. The article authored by the nurse and published in my journal was the plagiarized article.

The second question relates to more than ethics or professional conduct. The significant issue goes back to the process of systematic reviews and effect sizes when data from multiple smaller studies are aggregated to determine if a specific intervention is more effective than the control. This is the foundation of evidence-based practice and clinical practice guidelines. Clinicians around the world rely on systematic reviews of pooled studies to keep pace with the every changing environment of health care and to mitigate the effect of confounding results of small, underpowered studies. In addition to being unprofessional and unethical, duplicate publication, whether by outright plagiarism of an article or by authors who submit the same data to multiple journals, can affect the outcome of systematic reviews.

How do Editors Resolve such Conflicts?

My first thought when I read the medical editor's email was: has this ever happened in a nursing journal and if so, how can I make a reasonable assessment of this situation? In all honesty, my first thought was why would a nurse copy an article from a medical journal to begin with and why did she submit it to my journal? That question could never be resolved, so I focused on the real issue: how to deal with this situation in a fair and logical manner. Given that this situation was outside my realm of previous experience, I began searching for resources. My publisher directed me to the website for the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE; http://publicationethics.org/) where I discovered a flow chart (Suspected plagiarism in a published article) to guide me through the process. In addition to clear directions about what steps to take at various points in the process, there were also sample
letters and guidance for the final step, retraction of the article.

After it became clear that this was a situation that called for a retraction, I wondered if any nursing journals had ever issued a retraction for plagiarism, but I was not sure how to find that information. I contacted the librarian at my university and asked if she could help me search for a retraction from a nursing journal. Within minutes, I had three librarians engaged in the task and in a few minutes I had copies of 3 retractions from nursing journals. As it turns out, you can search in PubMed for retractions in nursing journals. The COPE guidelines call for contacting the institution of the offending author and presenting the facts of the case, which I did. The author's university asked for written statements from me and copies of the articles, which I provided.

Like many editors, my first contact with COPE was a direct result of needing guidance about how to deal with ethical breaches of conduct (Pearson 2012). Although this was my first encounter with COPE, it would not be my last. Following this situation, my journal instituted plagiarism checking software, and although that was not available at the time of the case detailed above, I found that many authors were submitting plagiarized work. Looking back on my prior years as an editor, I only recall one instance of a reviewer spotting blatant plagiarism in a submission. Clearly, automated software was finding more than reviewers would ever find. I continued to use the COPE website to develop my process for rejection of plagiarized and duplicate submissions. I attended a COPE meeting in the US and met Geri Pearson (Pearson, 2012) who was the first nurse elected to this international council. The next time there was a call for candidates to stand for elections to COPE, I submitted my papers and was elected.

**How does COPE operate?**

COPE is an international organization founded in 1997 in the United Kingdom (UK). Now, Council members reside in Australia, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Switzerland, UK, Iran, Israel, Canada, Brazil, and the United States (Geri Pearson and I are the only members from the US at present). Council members are elected as Trustees of the organization, which is a registered Charity in the UK. These are voluntary positions, and we represent a broad spectrum of journals from medicine, nursing, dentistry, pharmacology, feminist studies, bench sciences, business, ethics, literature, informatics, and economics; there is also a publisher and an ombudsman serving on the Council. The two nurses on the COPE Council (of the 19 elected members) bring a set of skills and perspectives to the organization that I have come to recognize. For example, some of the issues raised at the COPE Forum, at which COPE members can present ethical cases to the Council for advice, relate to qualitative studies. Many Council members are quantitative researchers or bench scientists with little to no experience with qualitative work. Nurses and others in the humanities bring a more comprehensive understanding of the process of qualitative and historical research.

COPE has nearly 8,000 members, most of whom are journal editors. You may be a member and not know it. Publishers join by signing on their journals and sometimes the access information does not get to all the editors. If you are curious about your status, you can check your journal name in the alphabetical members’ list on the website ([http://publicationethics.org/members](http://publicationethics.org/members)) or contact your publishing manager for more information.

Through the efforts of COPE and other organizations (eg, The International Academy of Nursing Editors; [http://www.nursingeditors­inane.org/](http://www.nursingeditors­inane.org/)), maintaining high ethical standards in nursing journalism has become easier. We are bringing awareness to potential ethical situations that were more difficult to see in the past. We are also bringing awareness to new “wrinkles” in unethical conduct through the case presentations and discussion papers available on the COPE website. If you
have not visited the COPE website, I hope you will do so. If you have not participated in a COPE Forum, I think you will find it a valuable member benefit. I always think of COPE as our “water cooler” – the place where editors can go to discuss the pressing issues we sometimes face, the place where we can get a crash course in publication ethics.

References
http://www.nurseauthoreditor.com/article.asp?id=178

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