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# Leading an Ethical Journal: The Editor's Role

## Leading an Ethical Journal: The Editor's Role

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**NURSE AUTHOR & EDITOR, 2019, 29(4), 4**

Earlier this year, I had a brief tenure as the Editor-in-Chief of a scholarly nursing journal. It is a newish journal, with a small readership and many *Nurse Author & Editor* readers have likely not heard of it—although I can assure you it was not a predatory publication! In this article, I don't want to dwell on what happened or what might have been, but rather focus on what I learned about the ethical responsibilities of an editor during my time in the role.

Upon assuming the job, I quickly realized that the depth and scope of an editor's ethical responsibilities were a bit more than I had anticipated. With that in mind, my first and foremost mission was to understand how to best serve the readers of

the journal and its affiliated society. My goal was to produce a journal that would meet best practice guidelines for scholarly publication in nursing and healthcare.



To start, I read widely on issues related to professional publication and the role of an editor. Through this process, I became acquainted with the Council of Science Editors' (CSE) [\*White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications\*](#) (2018). This publication provides a wealth of knowledge that addresses the roles of editors, reviewers, authors, and the societies that own publications. It differentiates how each member of the team works together to promote integrity, transparency, and fundamentally original work. It is critical for each team member to recognize the contributions of the others and maintain confidentiality so that an author's work is protected throughout the submission, review, and revision process. Editors, reviewers, and authors need ongoing education in order to maintain standards around a variety of ethical and publishing issues, including appropriate ethical approval and consent (IRB in the US), authorship concerns, and permission to use previously published or copyrighted materials, to name just a few.

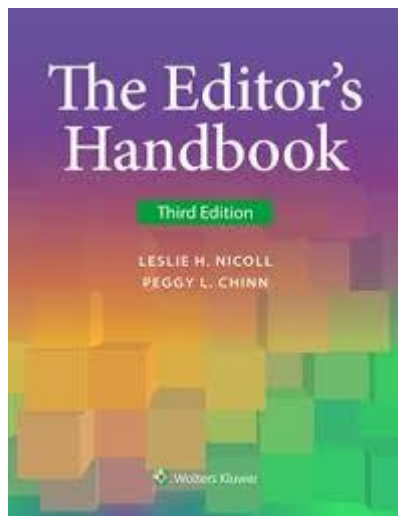
Another extremely useful resource I learned about is the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Their website ([publicationethics.org](http://publicationethics.org)) offers white papers, flowcharts, and algorithms to help editors, reviewers, and authors navigate thorny issues that they may encounter in all phases of the writing and publishing process. Even in the absence of a specific issue, the COPE website is a valuable learning resource, in and of itself, and is worth an investment of time to peruse it.



I also became acquainted with and was warmly welcomed into the International Academy of Nursing Editors (INANE). I learned from those with experience and wisdom about best practices for ethical issues in publishing, editorial boards, and society journals. Membership in INANE is close to 500 people and I learned that they, collectively support the guidance from CSE and COPE. I also learned that INANE members take mentorship seriously! From the start, I found support, guidance, and a willingness from those senior to me to share their knowledge and wisdom. If you are a new editor reading this, I encourage you to reach out to INANE ([nursingeditors.com](http://nursingeditors.com)) and take advantage of all they have to offer.

Editors have a special brand of ethical responsibility, including editorial independence. This means that the editor must have “editorial freedom, comprising both authority and autonomy” (CSE, 2018, p. 6). Essentially, this requires that the editor can freely make decisions about content, policies, and the editorial board (CSE, 2018). COPE offers similar guidance: “The relationship of editors to publishers and journal owners is often complex but should always be based on the principle of editorial independence,” (COPE, 2019, p. 8). Another key responsibility that an editor undertakes is accountability to the public. The editor must ensure that high-quality original manuscripts are peer reviewed in a thoughtful, consistent way and that the author’s confidentiality is maintained throughout the review process. The editor must remain free of financial or other influences that could become a conflict of interest. For me, a key personal value is integrity. I was determined to ensure an ethical, fair publication that serves the membership of the journal’s affiliated society as well as other readers.

Reviewers for a journal also have an ethical obligation to authors and readers. They review submissions for content, appropriate citations, and similarity to other publications. Their ethical obligations include confidentiality for the work involved, free from financial or topical conflicts of interest. An editor must ensure that



reviewers be civil in their comments and strive to support authors through their reviews. As a modest thank you for sharing their time and expertise, many reviewers are given continuing education credit for their time reviewing journal manuscripts, although this is not a universal practice. Nicoll and Chinn (2019), in an informal survey of nursing editors, found that 41% (20 out of 49 respondents) offer this option. Depending on the journal, 30% to 90% of reviewers took advantage of

the opportunity to receive continuing education credit.

Authors have similar expectations for ethical behavior. Their writing must be free of commercial or financial bias, without plagiarism of words or ideas. Citations of other works must be appropriate and complete. Authors should not repurpose previously published works without significant new information or findings. Authors must also ensure that they are protecting their participants with informed consent for research or case reports. Institutional review board approval should be documented in the manuscript and authors should be prepared to submit documentation of their IRB approval or authorization upon request of the editor.

If, after submission, an error is identified, the author must contact the editor to address the concern. I learned that best practice is to confer with editorial board members, and next with the publisher, to seek an appropriate resolution to the issue. Readers independent of the author may also notice errors or other irregularities. If this happens, they should also bring the issue to the editor's attention as the first step to solve the problem.

As the editor of a society journal, I had a responsibility to my readers and society members to ensure all aspects of the journal's business strive for transparency and consistently excellent contributions to the published scholarly literature in

nursing. Working collaboratively with the editorial board, I sought to be engaged in the journal's strategic planning process and advancing its profile through the quality of its content. This continuous process included mentoring new authors and reviewers to enable me, as the editor, the Editorial Board, and the journal to deliver on identified goals and promises.

My tenure as an editor was brief, but memorable and although it didn't work out quite as expected, it did not sour me on the important contributions to the scholarly literature that editors facilitate. I learned that I enjoyed the work and I believe I brought the appropriate knowledge and skills to be effective in the role. I am sharing my "lessons learned" in the hopes that others who might be considering being an editor—or are new in the position—can use some what I learned to give themselves a "kickstart" in their new endeavor. And, I will be honest: I am continuing to be active in INANE, writing articles such as this, and seeking out new editorial opportunities. My email is below—reach out if you would like to chat!

## REFERENCES

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Leslie Nicoll

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Editor-in-Chief