

# ***American Journal of Public Health*** **Policy on Ethical Principles**

(Based on WAME, Publication Ethics Policies for Medical Journals)  
November 3, 2007

## **Purpose of a Policy on Ethical Principles**

The *American Journal of Public Health (AJPH)* aspires to select, through peer review, the highest quality science and manuscripts related to public health practice. To achieve this, the entire peer review and publication process of the *AJPH* must be thorough, objective, and fair. Every aspect of this process involves important ethical principles and decisions. The reputation of *AJPH* depends on the trust of readers, authors, researchers, reviewers, editors, public health practitioners, research subjects, funding agencies, and administrators of public health policy. This trust is enhanced by describing as explicitly as possible *AJPH* policies to ensure the ethical treatment of all participants in the publication process.

## **Study Design and Ethics**

The *AJPH* considers papers in which research has been conducted to high standards of quality control and data analysis. Data and records must be retained and produced for review upon request. Fabrication, falsification, concealment, deceptive reporting, or misrepresentation of data constitute scientific misconduct.

The *AJPH* endorses increased reporting on the external validity of all research studies, and considers external validity when critiquing manuscripts.

The *AJPH* adheres to the basic principles of the Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association (<http://www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm>). Present practice of the *AJPH* is to ask authors of submissions to state whether their studies involved human participants, and, if so, whether they have satisfied review on ethical grounds by an appropriate institutional review board (IRB) or whether such an IRB has found their studies to be exempt from review. The statement on Human Participant Protection at the end of published pieces shows whether studies have been approved or exempted by a named IRB. If human participants are involved, a statement of approval by an institutional review board (IRB) and the participants' informed consent is required. It is the responsibility of the lead author to keep a copy of the IRB approval received in his/her personal file. The *AJPH* does not require a copy of the approval form. If IRB approval was not obtained or sought, a short explanation (1-2 sentences) to this effect is required.

Also relevant to the *AJPH* is the *Principles of the Ethical Practice of Public Health* (<http://www.apha.org/NR/rdonlyres/1CED3CEA-287E-4185-9CBD-BD405FC60856/0/ethicsbrochure.pdf>), which includes Values and Beliefs Underlying

the Code, Principles of the Ethical Practice of Public Health, and Notes on the Individual Ethical Principles. Authors should comply with these Principles.

All research studies involving animals must have been performed in compliance with guidelines outlined in the Animal Welfare Act, US Public Health Service Policy on the Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (<http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/olaw/references/PHSPolicyLabAnimals.pdf>, accessed 05/25/07), *NRC Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals* (<http://books.nap.edu/readingroom/books/labrats/>, accessed 05/25/07), or *Guide for the Care and Use of Agricultural Animals in Agricultural Research and Teaching* (Fass 1999) or with equivalent guidelines.

### **Authorship and Acknowledgments**

Authorship implies a significant intellectual contribution to the work, some role in writing the manuscript and reviewing the final draft of the manuscript. For all manuscripts, the corresponding author in collaboration with co-authors must provide information on the specific contributions each author has made to the article. Simple copy-editing does not warrant co-authorship or acknowledgements.

Example: E.C. Frampton conceived of the study and supervised all aspects of its implementation. S. Hampton assisted with the study and completed the analyses. R.E. Lewison synthesized analyses and led the writing. N.C. Smithson assisted with the study and analyses. All authors helped to conceptualize ideas, interpret findings, and review drafts of the manuscript. (see <http://www.ajph.org/misc/ifora.shtml>)

All authors must take responsibility in writing for the accuracy of the manuscript, and one author must be the guarantor and take responsibility for the work as a whole.

Acknowledgements are acceptable for people who do not qualify as authors but provided support for the study and manuscript. Examples of suitable acknowledgements may include: people who provided assistance with technical analysis, manuscript preparation, study design, or data collection. Other entities may include funders, in-kind contributors, clinician investigators or interviewers. Additional guidance on authorship and acknowledgements is provided by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (available at <http://www.icmje.org/#author>).

### **Conflicts of Interest**

Conflicts of interest (competing interest) include facts known to a participant in the publication process that if revealed later, would make a reasonable reader feel misled or deceived (or an author, reviewer, or editor feel defensive). Conflicts of interest may influence the judgment of authors, reviewers, and editors; these conflicts often are not immediately apparent to others or to the reviewer. They may be personal, commercial, political, academic, or financial. Financial interests may include employment, research

funding (received or pending), stock or share ownership, patents, payment for lectures or travel, consultancies, non-financial support, or any fiduciary interest in the company. The perception or appearance of a conflict of interest, without regard to substance, alone creates conflict, since trust is eroded among all participants.

All such interests (or their absence) must be declared in writing by authors upon submission of the manuscript. If any are declared, they should be published with the article. If there is doubt about whether a circumstance represents a conflict, it should be disclosed. Sources of full or partial funding or other support for the research must be declared and should be described in an acknowledgement if the manuscript is published; if anyone besides the authors is involved in analysis, interpretation, or control of the data, this must also be declared. The role of the funding organization or sponsor in the design and conduct of the study, in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data, and in the preparation, review, or approval of the manuscript should be specified.

Peer reviewers for the journal should annually declare to the editor-in-chief any similar competing interests, financial or non-financial, that might affect their work for the journal. Non-financial competing interests may include a similar manuscript under review in the same or another journal, a similar research project nearing completion, a close collaboration (or competition) with one of the authors of the manuscript, etc. Additionally, any reviewer who has reason to believe he or she may have a conflict of interest on a particular manuscript should be required to reveal that conflict to the editor, who will then determine their appropriate level of involvement.

Editors can also have conflicts of interest, and members of the editorial team (just like authors and reviewers) should be required to declare any possible conflicts of interest as and when they arise (these will differ according to the level of involvement of editorial team members, but should be addressed for all). Editors assigned the review of a manuscript in which they may have a conflict of interest should recuse themselves from that supervision, and it should be reassigned to an editor with no conflict. To increase transparency and trust, the policies that govern the management of such potential conflicts should be available to readers in the print journal or on the Web.

Manuscripts authored by members of the editorial team present a special instance of potential conflict of interest. The review of these manuscripts must always be supervised by the editor-in-chief, who will review the decision of the assigned decision editor for objectivity before the decision is final.

## **Peer Review**

Peer review is fundamental to the publication process and the dissemination of science, policy, and analytic assessments. Peer reviewers are experts chosen by editors to provide written assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of written research, with the aim of improving the reporting of research and identifying the most appropriate and highest quality material for the journal. Peer reviewers selected for the *AJPH* are required to meet at least minimum standards regarding their background in original research, publication

of articles, formal training, and previous critical appraisal of manuscripts. Peer reviewers should be experts in the scientific question, policy, or analytical topic addressed in the articles they review, and should be selected for their objectivity and overall knowledge.

Reviews are expected to be professional, honest, courteous, prompt, and constructive. The desired major elements of a high-quality review should be as follows:

- The reviewer should have identified and commented on major strengths and weaknesses of study design and methodology.
- The reviewer should comment accurately and constructively upon the quality of the author's interpretation of the data, including acknowledgment of its limitations.
- The reviewer should comment on major strengths and weaknesses of the manuscript as a written communication, independent of the design, methodology, results, and interpretation of the study.
- The reviewer should comment on any ethical concerns raised by the study, or any possible evidence of low standards of scientific conduct.
- The reviewer should provide the author with useful suggestions for improvement of the manuscript.
- The reviewer should evaluate the submission on its scientific, policy, or analytic value and the robustness of its conclusions independently of his/her personal opinion on the issue.
- The review should provide the editor the proper context and perspective to make a decision on acceptance (and/or revision) of the manuscript.

A submitted manuscript is a privileged communication; reviewers must treat it as confidential. It should not be retained or copied. Also, reviewers must not share the manuscript with any colleagues without the explicit permission of the editor. Reviewers and editors must not make any personal or professional use of the data, arguments, or interpretations (other than those directly involved in its peer review) prior to publication unless they have the authors' specific permission or are writing an editorial or commentary to accompany the article.

### **Editorial Decisions**

Decisions about a manuscript should be based only on its importance, methodological rigor, originality, clarity, and relevance to the journal's mission. Studies with negative results, or those challenging previously published work or widely held beliefs, should receive equal consideration.

Statements made by authors that are defamatory or otherwise unreasonably critical towards persons or institutions may jeopardize the objectivity of the *AJPH* and create ground for requested amendments to or rejection of the manuscript.

## Originality, Prior Publication, and Media Relations

The *AJPH* does not publish work that has been published elsewhere, with the exception of work that has been presented as an abstract or in a report of a scientific meeting, or reprinting of classic papers that have historical value. The journal's embargo policy is available online (<http://www.apha.org/about/news/ajphreleases/ajphpresspolicy.htm>).

### Plagiarism

Plagiarism is scientific misconduct and includes the use of others' published and unpublished ideas or words (or other intellectual property) without attribution or permission, and presenting them as new and original rather than derived from an existing source. The intent and effect of plagiarism is to mislead the reader as to the contributions of the plagiarizer. This applies whether the ideas or words are taken from abstracts, research grant applications, Institutional Review Board applications, or unpublished or published manuscripts in any publication format (print or electronic).

Self-plagiarism refers to the practice of an author using portions of their previous writings on the same topic in another of their publications, without specifically citing it. All previous work from the author(s) should be properly cited if used in submitted manuscripts.

### Responding to Allegations of Possible Misconduct

#### *Definitions of Misconduct*

Deception may be deliberate, by reckless disregard of possible consequences, or by ignorance. Since the underlying goal of misconduct is to deliberately deceive others as to the truth, the journal's preliminary investigation of potential misconduct must take into account not only the particular act or omission, but also the apparent intention (as best it can be determined) of the person involved. Misconduct does not include unintentional error. The most common forms of scientific misconduct include (the following are taken with minor modification from the Office of Research Integrity publication *Analysis of Institutional Policies for Responding to Allegations of Scientific Misconduct*, [http://ori.hhs.gov/documents/institutional\\_policies.pdf](http://ori.hhs.gov/documents/institutional_policies.pdf), accessed 05/25/07):

- **Falsification of data:** ranges from fabrication to deceptive selective reporting of findings and omission of conflicting data, or willful suppression and/or distortion of data.
- **Plagiarism:** The appropriation of the language, ideas, or thoughts of another without crediting their true source, and representation of them as one's own original work (see prior section).
- **Improprieties of authorship:** Improper assignment of credit, such as excluding others, misrepresentation of the same material as original in more than one publication, inclusion of individuals as authors who have not made a contribution

- to the work published; or submission of multi-authored publications without the concurrence of all authors.
- **Misappropriation of the ideas of others:** an important aspect of scholarly activity is the exchange of ideas among colleagues. Scholars can acquire novel ideas from others during the process of reviewing grant applications and manuscripts. However, improper use of such information can constitute fraud. Wholesale appropriation of such material constitutes misconduct.
  - **Violation of generally accepted research practices:** Serious deviation from accepted practices in proposing or carrying out research, improper manipulation of experiments to obtain biased results, deceptive statistical or analytical manipulations, or improper reporting of results.
  - **Material failure to comply with legislative and regulatory requirements affecting research:** Including but not limited to serious or substantial, repeated, willful violations of applicable local regulations and law involving the use of funds, care of animals, human subjects, investigational drugs, recombinant products, new devices, or radioactive, biologic, or chemical materials.
  - **Inappropriate behavior in relation to misconduct:** this includes unfounded or knowingly false accusations of misconduct, failure to report known or suspected misconduct, withholding or destruction of information relevant to a claim of misconduct and retaliation against persons involved in the allegation or investigation.
  - This includes qualifications, experience, or research accomplishments to advance the research program, to obtain external funding, or for other professional advancement.

### *Responses to Possible Misconduct*

Misconduct allegations will be investigated by a committee consisting of the editor-in-chief, the editorial board chair, and other editors and editorial board members, as determined by the editor-in-chief and editorial board chair, who have specific expertise in the area being investigated.

When allegations concern authors, the peer review and publication process for the manuscript in question will be halted while the process above is carried out. The investigation will be completed even if the authors withdraw their paper, and the responses below will still be considered. In the case of allegations against reviewers or editors, they will be replaced in the review process while the matter is investigated. Those who are the subject of such allegations will be given the opportunity to respond and provide data supporting their response.

All such allegations should be kept confidential; the number of inquiries and those involved should be kept to the minimum necessary to achieve this end. Whenever possible, references to the case in writing should be kept anonymous.

Journals have an obligation to readers and the public to ensure that their published research is both accurate and adheres to the highest ethical standard. Therefore, if an

inquiry concludes there is a reasonable possibility of misconduct, responses should be undertaken, chosen in accordance with the apparent magnitude of the misconduct. Responses may be applied separately or combined, and their implementation should depend on the circumstances of the case as well as the responses of the participating parties and institutions. The following options are ranked in approximate order of severity:

- A letter of explanation (and education) sent only to the person against whom the complaint is made, where there appears to be a genuine and innocent misunderstanding of principles or procedure.
- A letter of reprimand to the same party, warning of the consequences of future such instances, where the misunderstanding appears to be not entirely innocent.
- A formal letter referring the concerns to the relevant head of educational institution and/or funding body, with all the commentary and evidence collected by the journal. This will occur when it is believed that genuine misconduct is likely to have occurred, and its goal will be to submit the case for consideration of formal review and judgment by organizations better suited to that task than a peer review journal.
- A formal letter as above, including a written request to the supervising institution that a investigation be carried out and the findings of that inquiry reported in writing to the journal.
- Publication of a notice of redundant or duplicate publication or plagiarism, if appropriate (and unequivocally documented). Such publication will not require approval of authors, and should be reported to their institution.
- Formal withdrawal or retraction of the paper from the scientific literature, published in the journal, informing readers and the indexing authorities (National Library of Medicine, etc), if there is a formal finding of misconduct by an institution. Such publication will not require approval of authors, should be reported to their institution, and should be readily visible and identifiable in the journal. It should also meet other requirements established by the International Committee of Journal Editors ([www.icmje.org/#correct](http://www.icmje.org/#correct), accessed 05/25/07). Formal withdrawal or retraction of paper will take place only after a thorough investigation that includes due process for the author and an opportunity for the author to present a defense against any allegations before a neutral group of peers.

Editors or reviewers who are found to have engaged in scientific misconduct should be removed from further association with the journal, and this fact reported to their institution.

### **Relation of the Journal to the Sponsoring Society**

The primary responsibility of the editor-in-chief is to inform and educate readers, with attention to the accuracy and importance of journal articles, and to protect and strengthen the integrity and quality of the journal and its processes. The publisher is ultimately responsible for all aspects of publishing the journal, including its staff, budget, and business policies. The relationship between publisher and the editor-in-chief should be

based on mutual respect and trust, and recognition of each other's authority and responsibilities, because conflicts can damage the intellectual integrity and reputation of the journal and its financial success.

The following are guidelines for protecting the responsibility and authority of the editor-in-chief and publisher:

- The conditions of the editor-in-chief's employment, including authority, responsibilities, term of appointment, and mechanisms for resolving conflict, should be explicitly stated in writing and approved by both the editor and publisher before the editor is appointed. The same applies to any agreement on interpretation and/or amendment of such conditions, after appointment.
- The editor-in-chief should have full authority over the editorial content of the journal, generally referred to as “editorial independence.” The publisher should not interfere in the evaluation, selection, or editing of individual articles, either directly or by creating an environment in which editorial decisions are strongly influenced.
- Editorial decisions should be based mainly on the validity of the work and its importance to readers, not the commercial success of the journal. Editors should be free to express critical but responsible views without fear of retribution, even if these views might conflict with the commercial goals of the publisher. To maintain this position, editors should seek input from a broad array of advisors, such as reviewers, editorial staff, the editorial board, and readers.
- The editor-in-chief should establish procedures that guard against the influence of commercial and personal self-interest on editorial decisions.
- The publisher has the right to hire and fire the editor-in-chief, but the publisher should dismiss the editor-in-chief only for substantial academic or administrative reasons. Examples of these reasons include: a pattern of irresponsible editorial decisions, scientific misconduct, disagreement with the overall editorial direction of the journal, or unlawful acts, that are incompatible with a position of trust.
- The editor-in-chief is an appointee of the Executive Board of the American Public Health Association and the editor-in-chief’s appointment status is governed by their administrative policies with these ethical principles in mind.

*Acknowledgments:* This document was drafted based on modifications to “Publication Ethics Policies for Medical Journals” developed by the World Association of Medical Editors (<http://www.wame.org/resources/publication-ethics-policies-for-medical-journals>, accessed 05/25/07) as well as other resources as referenced throughout this document from organizations including the World Medical Association, U.S. Public Health Service, the DHHS Office of Integrity Research, and the International Committee of Journal Editors. In addition, recognition is extended to the *AJPH* Editorial Board and *AJPH* Editors for their review, recommendations, and edits to this document.