Part of running an editorial office is planning for contingencies. But isn’t there always a scenario you hadn’t anticipated and don’t know how to handle?

The Committee for Publication Ethics (COPE) is considered the gold standard for ethics policies, providing resources, flowcharts, and curated cases that equip editorial staff with guidelines for handling ethics challenges. Many journals become members of COPE, indicating they follow their set guidelines and adhere to their policies.

Following COPE recommendations, journals may communicate their own ethics guidelines and policies in the Instructions for Authors document, generally found on journal websites. As the importance of transparency increases, these guidelines can be quickly updated online or published within the pages of their journals.

In the United States, a lot of time is spent discussing ethics issues, for example, among members of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME). However, for colleagues overseas who many not have the same staff and financial resources as US-based teams, navigating these issues is more challenging. Having access to editors across the world via Listserv becomes an incredibly valuable resource for sharing policies, procedures, and “how I do it.” In any given week, not only best practices for peer review are discussed via Listserv, but also ethical challenges faced by members and how to handle them.

Some authors fight over authorship issues, others salami-slice research or demand retractions, others manipulate figures or plagiarize with reckless abandon, and still others fail to disclose relevant conflicts of interest, which adversely affects the reader’s judgement of their work. Generally, cases are handled internally within the journal. However, in extreme cases, the best option is to consult an attorney. At the Aesthetic Surgery Journal, we had a case where authors were fighting over the intellectual property rights of figures. The authors both lived and worked in China, and one accused the other of stealing his work then dropping him from the authorship line. They exchanged harassing texts (in Chinese) that escalated quickly. The editorial office followed the COPE guidelines, undertook an extensive investigation, and based on the evidence and responses from both authors, were able to ascertain who was in the wrong. We were ill-equipped to handle threats happening on another continent, we were not fluent in Chinese, and we were concerned when personal threats were made. We consulted our Society’s legal counsel after agreeing on the course of action and asked him to send a cease and desist letter to the offending author.

Recently, COPE contacted members suggesting they perform an audit of their editorial processes. If you are a COPE member, and haven’t performed this for your journal, we strongly suggest doing so here (also, see Figure 1 for a sample page of the audit checklist). Below are some key takeaways for editorial offices to consider:

1. Develop an Ethics Committee to adjudicate complex issues.
2. Encourage ORCID sign-up, adding a link in the Instructions for Authors.
3. Encourage COPE guideline adherence, adding a link to the COPE flowcharts in the Instructions for Authors.
4. Publish COI statements for the editorial leadership of the journal.
6. ETHICAL OVERSIGHT

6.1 Ethical oversight should include, but is not limited to, policies on consent to publication, publication on vulnerable populations, ethical conduct of research using animals, ethical conduct of research using human subjects, handling confidential data and ethical business/marketing practices.

- Do your journal office and website have detailed guidelines on:
  - Requiring consent from adults and parents/guardians of minors for study participation and/or publication of their data?
  - Ethics related to publishing studies on vulnerable populations, e.g., during humanitarian crises or health emergencies?
  - Requiring prior approval and ethical conduct of research involving humans or animals?
  - Pre-registration of human clinical trials and declaration of any altered protocol steps?
  - Handling and storing confidential study data and any personal data collected from authors/subscribers (do you need to comply with the EU General Data Protection Regulation)?
  - Ensuring ethical business/marketing practices?
  - Do you require proof, notification or statements of ethics approvals and ethical practices (e.g., corresponding author makes declarations, copies of approvals, copy of template consent form, clinical trial site name and registration number)?
  - Do you require a transparency statement from one author as guarantor to be published with the publication (e.g., as required by the BMJ)?
  - Do you train journal staff, editors and peer reviewers how to detect and report possible author misconduct, using relevant COPE resources (e.g., peer review manipulation, peer reviewer guidelines)?
  - Do you have an ethics panel/committee or an advisor/member of the editorial board with specific responsibility for ethical issues (e.g., ombudsperson)?
  - Does your journal consult and link to relevant COPE resources (e.g., COPE flowchart on a suspected ethical problem and COPE guidelines on consent for publishing medical case reports and research, audit and service evaluations)?

Figure 1. Reprinted with permission of the Committee for Publication Ethics (COPE) from their 2018 journal audit.
On a daily basis, editorial staff are likely to use iThenticate or other plagiarism detection software during peer review or after acceptance. Identifying high degrees of overlap is a red flag, and staff can follow the related COPE ethics flowcharts: What to do if you suspect redundant (duplicate) publication or What to do if you suspect plagiarism. There is a different flowchart if the duplication is discovered after publication versus during peer review. Some offices are also regularly checking manuscripts for the presence of manipulated images, which can be indicators of misconduct, or at least of sloppiness. Several years ago, the International Journal of Cancer implemented a regular check of figures containing blots or microscopy images for all manuscripts ready for acceptance. The staff identified many papers containing inaccuracies, which could have been solved easily, and only a few cases were attributable to real misconduct. Although time consuming, this procedure has proved to be extremely useful and well appreciated by the authors. Catching inaccuracies or misconduct prior to publication is always preferable and avoids such instances being discovered by readers or whistle blowers, which reflects poorly on the journal. COPE has recently published the flowchart What to do if you suspect image manipulation in a published article, which can be of valuable assistance. Whether it is plagiarism, duplicate publication, or other potential misconduct, the first step is always to notify the author and ask for a response. Other COPE flowcharts may be found here and include:

1. What to do if you suspect fabricated data (in a submitted or published manuscript)
2. Changes in authorship (before and after publication)
3. What to do if you suspect ghost, guest, or gift authorship
4. What to do if a reviewer suspects undisclosed conflict of interest (COI) (in a submitted or published manuscript)
5. What to do if you suspect an ethical problem with a submitted manuscript
6. What to do if you suspect a reviewer has appropriated an author’s ideas or data
7. How to respond to whistle blowers (when concerns are raised directly or via social media)

Like any society, COPE must keep up with the times. There was no flowchart concerning social media 10 years ago (#7 above) and as technology, readership, and sharing content evolves, so will the need for new flowcharts to handle new problems.

Thinking about the evolution of ethics over the past 20 years, we realize there have been many changes, especially with the movement toward greater transparency. For example, the adoption of the Sunshine Act in 2010 put US-based doctors under a greater microscope than ever before, requiring them to disclose explicit financial information about their relationships with hospitals, drug manufacturers, medical device companies, and drug makers. Now, anyone can look up doctors, hospitals, or companies and confirm payments here. This is particularly useful to US-based editorial offices when they’re publishing supplements and must include all COIs related to sponsors, products, and devices. In regular journal issues, because of the sensitivities around financially sponsored medical research, this resource becomes even more valuable. Of course, there are authors who forget to disclose or don’t realize how many years back the disclosures are required, and there are even some who insist a certain COI is not relevant. As members of the ISMTE Ethics Committee, our best advice is this: When in doubt, disclose. I researched that phrase to ensure I wasn’t plagiarizing anyone, and it turns out, Lancet beat me to it (in 2007) in an editorial freely available here. The article reminds us of the importance of Institutional Review Boards and their contributions in this ethical context.

How do we in the editorial office expect authors and reviewers to keep abreast of new policies when we sometimes find it challenging? Journals communicate changes to authors and reviewers by direct email, at editorial board meetings, on journal websites, with updates to the Instructions for Authors, and through social media posts.

For example, with regard to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), implemented on May 25, 2018, at the Aesthetic Surgery Journal, we felt it was necessary to brief our readers. Our Editor-in-Chief wrote an editorial, “General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Breaches: What You Should Know,” available here. I also coauthored an editorial titled “Update on Scholarly Publication Ethics: Navigating the Confusing Landscape,” which is freely available here, to help educate both readers and our editorial board members.

Predatory publishing is a crisis. It encourages the unethical use and publication of an author’s work and name, for a fee (or often one that is waived). Valuable resources are stolen from legitimate publishers and the academic literature, when authors publish (whether knowingly or not) in predatory journals. By the time some authors learn what has happened, their work is already online, and it often requires legal intervention to reclaim or retract it. Educating your board, editorial team, and readership about the huge downside of publishing with these illegitimate entities is the only solution to
this ethics crisis. Read more about predatory publishing in this article in *Gastrointestinal Endoscopy* here.

Going forward, we are going to need contingency planning around potential ethics violations occurring on social media. In many fields, consent forms are crucial—but do they always apply to social media promotion? This is where the rubber meets the road. It may be a good idea to develop your own internal or published policy in anticipation of questions such as these:

1. How do you handle authors who upload full text or PDFs of published articles to ResearchGate?
2. Does your journal have consent to post images on social media, including faces and identifying jewelry or tattoos? Does the consent provided to the doctor only apply to print publication? What happens when the patient sees their photos online and questions it?
3. What relationship exists between journals, society members, and editorial staff, and who decides what gets posted and when? Are criteria clearly defined?
4. If an article is embargoed, but someone accidentally posts it on social media, what now?

Whether you prefer the word honest, ethical, or transparent, the idea is to manage such issues as professionally as possible and as early as possible, to ensure fairness and protection for your journal. Please visit the ISMTE website for the following additional resources on publication ethics—and remember, when in doubt, disclose!

1. Publication Ethics 101
2. How Can Legitimate Journals Distinguish Themselves from Predatory Journals?
3. The Managing Editor’s Role When an Editor is Being Investigated (includes Appendix)
4. Interview with an Expert Series: Ghost Writing: Haunting the Scientific Literature
5. Interview with an Expert Series: Image Manipulation in Scientific Publishing (Interview with Liz Williams, PhD)

**References**