IDEAS OF EDITORS OF MEDICAL JOURNALS ON PUBLICATION ETHICS (*)

Belma Akşit* ± Berna Arda**

SUMMARY

This study has been carried out to make an assessment of situation regarding the publication ethics from the editorial point of view. In international literature, there are not any articles under the subtitle ‘publication ethics’ based on honesty of the authors and questioning it through a variety of samples. On the other hand, it is possible to see a number of articles dealing with the ethics of research and publication, samples of cheating faced in this process and responsibilities of editors. In Turkey when similar topics are brought up and discussed, a publication ethics which only focus on researcher and potential author awareness and in turn which finds it enough to express only their ethical responsibilities is dominant. In the light of this context, expressing the concept of editorial ethics by editors themselves, from their point of view and though their own ideas will serve to make up for this demand. This article devoted to discuss editorial ethics in the light of a limited survey’s findings.

Key Words: Scientific Ethics, Research Ethics, Publication Ethics, Editorial Ethics.

Scientific publications, no doubt, play an important role in dissemination of medical knowledge, putting forward new aspects through discussion and making new scientific contributions. The peak level of articles by Turkish scientists in international science is a concrete result of the quality efforts made through years. However, leaving aside our quantitative position, it is necessary to come up with new ways of solutions, realize what to be regarded as problems and handle our publication process in terms of quality so as to put this process in a better position in ethical aspect as much as possible. This study has been carried out to make an assessment of situation regarding the publication ethics from the editorial point of view which is an important figure in publication process. In international literature, there are not any articles under the subtitle ‘publication ethics’ based on honesty of the authors and questioning it through a variety of samples. On the other hand, it is possible to see a number of articles

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* Prof. Dr., Baskent University, Faculty of Communication.
** Prof. Dr., Ankara University School of Medicine.

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dealing with the ethics of research and publication, samples of cheating faced in this process and responsibilities of editors (1-6). In Turkey when similar topics are brought up and discussed, a publication ethics which only focus on researcher and potential author awareness and in turn which finds it enough to express only their ethical responsibilities is dominant (7-9). In this context, there are few articles which put forward ‘editorial ethics’ and underline the necessity to meet the demand for such articles mentioned above (10-12). In the light of these realities, expressing editorial ethics by editors themselves, from their point of view and though their own ideas will serve to make up for this demand.

Methodology

1. General information about the journals: A questionnaire was prepared consisting of 7 parts including information about the publication policy of the journal, referees, authors, personal characteristic of the editor, editorship and the board.

2. It is a descriptive one. The questionnaire was sent to all the editors of journals in the Turkish Medical Index, which is organized by Scientific and Technical Research Council of Turkey, in April 2000. 87 journal editors were sent the questionnaires and 41 of them completed and sent them back (47%) and answered questionnaires were evaluated. The data were analyzed through SPSS.

Findings

A) General information about journals

Analyzed their years of publication, the journals published for a long time have a high percentage. The journals published between the years 1980-1984 had a low circulation, however, from 1984 onwards this ratio increased substantially. The journals published 3 or 4 times a year were the majority. (87.8%)

Nearly 40% of the editors expressed that subscription fee, donation and ads were benefited and 25% of them said that they benefited from foundations/associations. Only 20% of them said that their journal was sponsored and nearly 10% of them left the question unanswered. ‘Foundations’ and ‘Universities’ were the most terms used by the editors who mentioned any sponsorship. 37% of the journals were mentioned to take ads. Medical firms and medical industry constituted the basis of these ads.

12% of the editors did not answer the question about how many copies were published. Among the ones who answered the question, nearly 67% expressed that their journals had a publication of 500-2000.

B) Publication policy

With regard to the questions of ‘the content and how it is determined’, answers such as ‘whether it is a product of a unique study and whether it is consistent with the specific content of journal’ were given. In addition ‘whether more than 50% of the articles is based on a real study or not in a volume’ or ‘whether the article complies with norm and content of journal’ were underlined. In 56% of the journals giving answers authors were required to submit an invitation letter and in 93% of the journals they were required to sign and submit application forms before the article was published. Regarding awareness in ethical subjects, in 63% of the journals authors were asked for the approval of the ethical board and in only 17% of the journals a copy of the approval taken from subjects was required to be submitted. When asked the ratio of turned down articles sent in 1999, those who gave the answer ‘15% or fewer’ constituted 35% of the answers; those who gave the answer ‘16-25%’ constituted 22% of the answers; those who gave the answer ‘26-51%’ constituted 24% of the answers. Different ideas were put forward about the articles refused by the editors themselves and published in another journal. The answers like ‘it shouldn’t be published at all’, ‘not appropriate’, ‘unfortunate’ had the highest ratio with 46%. When the answer ‘I’ll inform the editor of the situation’ was added, this ratio increased and the ratio was more than half of the answers. 78% of the journals had an editorial letter column and
90% of the journals focused on research based articles.

‘Publication of unauthorized knowledge, cases, samples and data without the consent of the original authors’ and ‘Citation without reference’ were the most common situations which didn’t comply with the publication ethics. Following these answers were ‘publication of an article in more than one journal’ and ‘listing of people who didn’t contribute to the research’.

C) Information about referees

88% positive answers were given to the question whether there were certain principles about appointment of referees. 85% of those who answered the question gave the answer ‘being an important and well-known figure in his field/his experience and scientific reliability’. 9% of the participants underlined the importance of the titles of the referee. 95% of the journals participating in the study expressed that ‘their referee had evaluation criteria to be followed’. Referees were not paid in any of the journals. Average period of review and editing was as follows: 60% of the participants gave the answer ‘shorter than a month’ and 32.5% of the participants gave the answer ‘1 –2 months’.

D) Information about authors

In 83% of the journals there was no limitation to the articles per each author and in 86% of the journals authors were required to sign and submit an approval form. In 88% of the journals the authors were not required to pay any fee and in none of the journals authors were paid any royalty. In 20% of the journals authors were required to subscribe to journals. The author profiles of journals were interesting as well. It was determined that there was almost no information about their age, sex and academic situation.

E) Personal information about editors

The age range of editors was nearly equaled as under and over 50. Female/male ratio was 1/3 and professors were the majority in distribution of academic titles. Those who were editors for less than 4 years constituted 46% of all editors.

F) Information about editorship

9.8% of the participants didn’t answer the question ‘Is there a job description for editors?’ and 65% of those who answered the question said ‘yes’. 40% of participants said that they did not know how it was described and there was no significant distribution among those who answered the question. 60% of them gave answers such as ‘being responsible for all kinds of work’ which was an ambiguous answer. Only 18% said that ‘scientific incentive is emphasized’. The ratio of the editors who said that ‘they read every single article submitted’ was 41.5%. ‘The criteria of acceptance’ were as follows: when 130 answers were evaluated at the rate of 30.8% ‘referee reports’; at the rate of 27.7% ‘being not published in any other journal’; at the rate of 27.7% ‘editor’s own point of view’; and at the rate of 13.8% ‘the ideas of the publication board’ were obtained. When asked the phases at which the editors would intervene, the answers received were extremely interesting. In that, the answer ‘spelling can be corrected’ was at the rate of 30,4%, the answer ‘it can be returned or adjourned’ at the rate of 23,2%, the answer ‘tables can be corrected’ at the rate of 23,2%, the answer ‘references can be crossed out’ at the rate of 13,1%, the answer ‘the editors can intervene at any phase’ at the rate of 9,1%, the answer ‘the editor cannot intervene at any phase in ethical aspect’ at the rate of 0,9%. It was significant that only one editor drew attention to the ethical concern.

G) Information about the publication board

The number of people in the publication board was given as ‘5 people or fewer’ at the rate of 47.5 %. When the frequency of the board meeting was asked, the most frequent answer was ‘once or twice a month’. In one fourth of the journals, no answer was given to the question ‘Is there a job description for the members of the board?’; in one fourth of the journals, the answer was ‘No’; the rest gave the answer ‘Yes’. No satisfactory answer could be obtained to the question ‘What is the job description of the board?’ The rate of editors who said that ‘there is a job description’ but didn’t make any definite
explanation was nearly 50.0%. Those who answered said ‘evaluation of referee reports’, ‘each member is responsible for his own field’, ‘determination of referee’, ‘determination of publication policy’. More than 70% of the members of the board also supervised in their own fields. There were few answers about the function of the board members in accepting articles. (Unknown 21.7%). The distribution of those who answered was as follows: ‘They express their ideas’ (41.8%); ‘they reach unanimous decision’ (22.6%); ‘they have no function’ (22.6%); ‘they make positive reference’ (6.5%); ‘they decide whether the phases are completed or not’ (6.5%).

H) The preference criteria of a journal

When asked the most determining factor for the preference of a journal, the majority of editors who answered underlined that a journal should be satisfactory in scientific aspects. On the other hand they also underlined that the originality of the article offering new horizons to the reader and print quality were the other factors for preference. The surprising point was that only one answer was given about the question whether a journal should comply with the ethical principles.

Discussion

- The fact that only one-third of journals started to come out before 1980 and the fact that there has been an ever growing increase in the number of journals since that date are due to the amendments in laws to adjust academic conditions in universities and requirement of publishing articles for academic promotion.
- It is clearly seen that journals are sponsored by medical industry through ads.
- In 93% of the journals authors are required to sign and submit an acceptance form before their articles are published in journals. And this is very concerning. In recent years an article written in Turkey ignited a discussion ‘the rights to be an author’. Considering this article, it can be concluded that this subject does not draw enough attention which it really deserves. So, the rate being so high is beyond being plausible.
- The fact that editors of journals require (at the rate of 63%) authors to submit an ethical board approval justifies the Regulation of Medical Research passed in 1993 which reads as ‘ethical board is compulsory’.
- This study shows that medical journals are deeply affected by the regulation taken by the Scientific and Technical Research Council of Turkey in 1994 that Medical Journals are to cover researches.
- Under the title ‘Conditions which are inconsistent with the publication ethic of the journal’ editors underline the following: ‘Publication of unauthorized knowledge, cases, samples and data without the consent of the original authors’ and ‘citation without reference’ and the ratio comes to 40%. However, when scientific reliability concept is considered, this rate is expected to be higher.
- 95% of the editors express that there are evaluation criteria which referees have to follow, however, when analyzed in detail it is a matter of concern that either some editors give no answer or some say ‘referees are left free’.
- It is virtually impossible to draw a framework for the job description of editors through the given answers. The answers vary from ‘being responsible for all kinds of work’ to ‘scientific incentive is emphasized’.
- And with regard to editorial authority the answers vary from ‘correcting spelling mistakes’, ‘crossing out references’ to ‘intervening at any phase’.
- Ambiguity about the job description of publication board and not realizing the importance of it is the same as the case of the editorship.
It is clear that there is an urgent need for clearing away the ambiguity about the job description of the editors and publication board and clarifying the authority of and scope of intervention by editors and also there is need for producing quality and original research by taking into consideration certain standards.

Another point here to be emphasized is what problems the requirement of international publication for academic promotion may bring about in Turkey in scientific field and how this recent change should be dealt with.
REFERENCES


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