Dear Committee on Publication Ethics,

We wish to submit the following complaint to COPE. As required by COPE, we provide below a summary of the concerns in under 500 words and an outline of the points within the COPE Code of Conduct which are relevant to the concerns.

We look forward to hearing back from you and will be happy to provide any further information required.

Kathleen Ruff, kruff@bulkley.net
On behalf of the signers listed below

Complaint to Committee on Publication Ethics

Pertinent Facts

Carlo La Vecchia, Associate Editor, European Journal of Cancer Prevention (EJCP), submitted an article, Role of stopping exposure and recent exposure to asbestos in the risk of mesothelioma, on Wednesday, September 28, 2011 to EJCP Editor-in-Chief, Jaak Janssens, who acted as peer reviewer and approved its publication four days later on Sunday, October 2, 2011.

La Vecchia and co-author, Paolo Boffetta, stated their review of the scientific literature showed “consistent evidence that for workers occupationally exposed (to asbestos) in the distant past, the risk of mesothelioma is not appreciably influenced by subsequent exposures. Further, stopping exposure does not materially modify the risk of mesothelioma over subsequent decades.”

La Vecchia and Boffetta stated they had no conflicts of interest. This is untrue. They were paid consultants to the Montefibre company, which faced charges regarding asbestos-related deaths of workers. In March, July and November 2011, the authors were paid to write briefs and testify in court, putting forward the arguments contained in the article.

The authors and the editor violated EJCP’s conflicts of interest instructions, which require that: “Authors must state all possible conflicts of interest in the manuscript, including financial, consultant, institutional and other relationships that might lead to bias or a conflict of interest”.

The authors disclosed false funding information, which enhanced the article’s credibility, stating: “This work was conducted with the contribution of the Italian Association for Cancer Research (AIRC), project No. 10068.” AIRC provided no funding for the article.

Complaint

This conduct, in our opinion, violates articles 1,2,3,5,8,12,15,17 of COPE’s Code of Conduct and Guidelines for Journal Editors (see below).

- Written evidence of the above misconduct was submitted to Prof. Janssens through a complaint signed by over 140 scientists, health defenders and organisations. He has not addressed the misconduct.
- Readers were given false information regarding the authors’ funding and conflicts of interest.
- The editor has not accepted accountability for correcting serious misinformation.
- The Editor-in-Chief has no known expertise on the asbestos issue, yet acted as expert peer reviewer. He approved the article for publication in four days. This constitutes improper peer review processes.
- The journal provided no description of peer review processes; has not published a correction showing the authors’ relevant competing interests; did not ensure that the article was reviewed by suitably qualified reviewers.
- No policies were in place for handling submissions from an Associate Editor to ensure unbiased review.
- The editor provided no information on any mechanism to take the complaint further or how to refer the complaint to COPE.
- The Editor did not have a system for managing board members’ conflicts of interest.
- The Editor did not publish a list of board members’ relevant interests, such as the fact that the Associate Editor co-owned a consulting company that contracted with industries to publish articles regarding health risks of their products.
- The Editor failed to enforce his journal’s stated conflict of interest requirements.
CODE OF CONDUCT AND BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES
FOR JOURNAL EDITORS

1. General duties and responsibilities of editors

  1.1. Editors should be accountable for everything published in their journals

  1.6. maintain the integrity of the academic record

  1.8. always be willing to publish corrections, clarifications, retractions and apologies when needed.

2. Relations with readers

  2.1. Readers should be informed about who has funded research or other scholarly work and whether the funders had any role in the research and its publication and, if so, what this was.

Best practice for editors would include:

• ensuring that all published reports and reviews of research have been reviewed by suitably qualified reviewers (including statistical review where appropriate)

• informing readers about steps taken to ensure that submissions from members of the journal’s staff or editorial board receive an objective and unbiased evaluation

3. Relations with authors

  3.4 A description of peer review processes should be published, and editors should be ready to justify any important deviation from the described processes.

Best practice for editors would include:

• publishing relevant competing interests for all contributors and publishing corrections if competing interests are revealed after publication
• ensuring that appropriate reviewers are selected for submissions (i.e. individuals who are able to judge the work and are free from disqualifying competing interests)

• publishing details of how they handle cases of suspected misconduct (e.g. with links to the COPE flowcharts)

5. Relations with editorial board members

Best practice for editors would include:

• having policies in place for handling submissions from editorial board members to ensure unbiased review

8. Editorial and peer review processes

8.1. Editors should take all reasonable steps to ensure the quality of the material they publish, recognising that journals and sections within journals will have different aims and standards.

12. Ensuring the integrity of the academic record

12.1. Errors, inaccurate or misleading statements must be corrected promptly and with due prominence.

12.2. Editors should follow the COPE guidelines on retractions.

15. Complaints

15.1. Editors should respond promptly to complaints and should ensure there is a way for dissatisfied complainants to take complaints further. This mechanism should be made clear in the journal and should include information on how to refer unresolved matters to COPE.

17. Conflicts of interest

17.1. Editors should have systems for managing their own conflicts of interest as well as those of their staff, authors, reviewers and editorial board members.

17.2. Journals should have a declared process for handling submissions from the editors, employees or members of the editorial board to ensure unbiased review.

Best practice for editors would include:

• publishing lists of relevant interests (financial, academic and other kinds) of all editorial staff and members of editorial boards (which should be updated at least annually).
NOTE: Titles and affiliations are given for identification purposes only. Some of the signers have been involved in asbestos litigation.

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Association of Asbestos Relatives and Victims (AFeVA), Casale Monferrato, Italy, representing 35,000 citizens and more than 1,800 victims of asbestos.

Ban Asbestos Network of India (BANI)

ToxicsWatch Alliance (TWA), India

Medicina Democratica Onlus, Italy

International Ban Asbestos Secretariat

Association Nationale de Défense des Victimes de l'Amiante (ANDEVA), France
RightOnCanada.ca

A Walk to Remember Victims of Asbestos, Canada

Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and environmental Health (ANROEV)

Occupational and Environmental Health Network of India (OEHNI), India, working with asbestos victims in different parts of the country

Canadian Association of University Teachers, Canada

Federation of Germans Victims Groups