

Retraction of research findings

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors*

Editors must assume initially that authors are reporting work based on honest observations. Nevertheless, two types of difficulty may arise.

First, errors may be noted in published articles that require the publication of a correction or an erratum of part of the work. It is conceivable that an error could be so serious as to vitiate the entire body of the work, but this is unlikely and should be handled by editors and authors on an individual basis. Such an error should not be confused with inadequacies exposed by the emergence of new scientific information in the normal course of research. The latter require no corrections or withdrawals.

The second type of difficulty is scientific fraud. If substantial doubts arise about the honesty of a work, either submitted or published, it is the editor's responsibility to ensure that the question is appropriately pursued (including, possibly, by consultation with the authors). However, it is not the task of editors to conduct a full investigation or to make a determination; that responsibility lies with the institution where the work was done or with the funding agency. The editor should be promptly informed of the final decision, and if a fraudulent paper has been published the journal must print a retraction.

The retraction, so labelled, should appear in a prominent section of the journal, be listed in the contents page and include in its heading the title of the original article. It should not simply be a letter to the editor. Ideally the first author should be the same in the retraction as in the article, although under certain circumstances the editor may accept retractions by other responsible persons. The text of the retraction should explain why the article is being retracted and include a bibliographic reference to it.

This statement was agreed on by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors at its meeting in Helsinki Sept. 14 to 15, 1987, and was reported in the Annals of Internal Medicine (1988; 108: 304). It is being published by the committee's members not only for the attention of journal editors but also for consideration by people who may have to take responsibility for investigating and announcing instances of error or fraud in their institutions.

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Reprints to: Managing editor, Annals of Internal Medicine, 4200 Pine St., Philadelphia PA 19104, USA.

The validity of previous work by the author of a fraudulent paper cannot be assumed. Editors may ask the author's institution to assure them of the validity of earlier work published in their journals or to retract it. If this is not done they may choose to publish an announcement to the effect that the validity of previously published work is not assured.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors would welcome debate and comments about this statement and may revise the statement in the light of comments received. Inquiries and comments should be sent to Dr. Edward J. Huth, Annals of Internal Medicine, 4200 Pine St., Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA, or Dr. Stephen Lock, British Medical Journal, BMA House, Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9JR, England.

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