

SCIENTIFIC MISCONDUCT: Editors Seek Ways to Cope With Fraud

Nigel Williams

LONDON--A new committee, set up by the editors of nine prominent medical journals, called last week for governments to tackle scientific misconduct and fraudulent publication in a more systematic way. "Cases are still exposed mostly by chance, and we worry about the scale of the problem," says Richard Smith, editor of the *British Medical Journal* and a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), which is one of several organizations in Europe currently looking into ways to beef up mechanisms to deal with publication misconduct.

COPE, whose members include the editors of *The Lancet*, *Gut*, and *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, invited more than 100 other editors here to discuss the scope of the problem and how to deal with evidence of misconduct in publications submitted to them for review. Editors related their experiences with incidents including the forging of signatures of patients and members of ethics committees that monitor research programs, plagiarism of research published in major Western journals for republication in Eastern European journals, publishing reports of patients who could be identified without their consent, and ignoring agreed inclusion and exclusion criteria for enrolling patients into a trial to bolster numbers. "Normal peer review can sometimes identify problems, but sorting through raw data to investigate them can be a miserable business," says Smith. These incidents were described without revealing names because of worries about libel laws and so that the careers of whistle blowers who brought cases to light would not be jeopardized. The meeting backed calls by one of the legal experts on the committee, Ian Kennedy of University College London, for the development of a protocol for editors to help protect genuine whistle blowers. But a key initial goal is just to advertise the scope of the problem. COPE, says Smith, will publish a list of reported cases of misconduct each year to sensitize editors to the problems.

COPE's efforts are being matched by other initiatives in Europe. In Germany, the main granting agency, the DFG, has appointed a commission in the wake of allegations that a pair of researchers manipulated data while working at Berlin's Max Delbrück Center for Molecular Medicine in the mid-1990s, and possibly at other laboratories before and afterward (*Science*, 15 August, [p. 894](#)). "It's an issue that has been dormant in some countries for too long," says DFG President Wolfgang Fr_hwald. The commission is expected to report its recommendations before the end of the year.

The Max Planck Society, Germany's premier research organization, is also carrying out a review of procedures it may adopt to help counter misconduct, and the results are also expected shortly. And at the most recent meeting of the European heads of research councils in Dublin last month, the problem of scientific misconduct was at the top of the agenda. The council heads are looking in particular at Danish efforts that have culminated in a new national committee on scientific dishonesty. Unlike the U.S. Office of Research Integrity, which can investigate misconduct claims only when they involve government funds, the Danish committee can work across the scientific spectrum. COPE is also interested in the U.S. and Danish efforts. "Editors can only go so far," says Kennedy. "Eventually you need an independent body to investigate claims fairly."