

My life as an editor - John Loadsman



At the EASE conference in Bucharest in June, I met John Loadsman, editor, investigator and professor from Sydney, Australia. John is the Chief Editor of *Anaesthesia and Intensive Care*, the official journal of the Australian Society of Anaesthetists, Australian and New Zealand Intensive Care Society and the New Zealand Society of Anaesthetists.

How did you get involved in editing?

Towards the end of my anaesthetic training in 1994 during a paediatric rotation, I sometimes worked in the operating room with Dr Jeanette Thirlwell, long-standing Executive Editor for *Anaesthesia & Intensive Care*. During the stable and quiet periods of anaesthesia, she gave me a very basic understanding of the production of the journal. A couple of years later the journal published the abstract of a paper I had presented at a local meeting and in early 1997 I bumped into Jeanette at another meeting and complained that there were quite a few typos in my published abstract. Instantly recognising an opportunity she said to me "Well, we need a proofreader. Would you like the job?" No remuneration involved.

I signed on and started proofreading, hardcopies posted to me in those days, and also often scribbled comments about various aspects of the content, including the odd occasion when I noticed some plagiarism or redundancy. After quite a few years of that the chief editor at the time, Dr Alan Duncan, suggested I might join the editorial board and then in 2008 I put my hand up when the journal needed a new editor.

How did you learn about publication ethics/research integrity? Do editors need a more formal training?

My interest in plagiarism and redundancy was accidental. While proofreading in my early days, I noticed a couple of odd things about the figures in a paper one day, and realised fairly quickly when I checked that a very large proportion of the text was the same as a chapter from a textbook in my department library. That made me pay more attention to what I was reading, and I learned just from my own experience what things to look out for. That was before we had software to check for duplication, so duplication was still very common, especially in review articles.

It would be wonderful if editors could get more training, but for many of us, especially perhaps in biomedical publication, editing isn't our primary occupation (I am a full-time anaesthesiologist, for example), and we learn as we go. Many of us, including myself, have had no formal training in editing at all, and finding the time for that would, in many cases, be extremely difficult. It might, if

formally required, actually discourage many people from getting involved.

Have you had cases of data fabrication/falsification in your journal? How did you discover them?

Yes, we have had cases involving our journal. We have retracted six of Fujii's papers, and have been involved in other cases that were caught prior to publication - one of these has also been made public after an institutional investigation and this has led to retraction of a number of papers in other journals. I have no doubt there are more that we haven't found, and I have little doubt the same applies to most journals. The cases I have discovered personally were, again, the result of noticing things in the manuscript that either didn't make sense, looked "too good to be true" or made me suspicious for some other reason. I have dealt with at least three clear-cut cases of fabrication submitted to our journal in the last six months. Obviously I am not in a position to discuss these but they take up an absolutely enormous amount of time and, very often, the institutions are unwilling to investigate or even respond to communication.

If the institutions are unwilling to investigate or respond, an editor can write to the regulatory bodies and it could last for years. What can we do in journals?

Yes, investigations can go on for years, if indeed anyone can be convinced to actually conduct the investigation in the first place. Editors often hit a brick wall in this respect, and bodies like COPE do not really provide useful guidelines in this situation, probably because there is no easy answer. I suspect that is why many editors give up before they even start. I don't know what journals or their editors can do to change any of this, apart from being diligent and persistent.

What is your current peer review system and what do you think about the future of peer review?

We have never relied upon authors to recommend reviewers, and it seems from the relatively recent and well-publicised cases involving peer review fraud that it probably isn't a good model. We currently have a fairly large pool of registered volunteer reviewers that we call upon, and sometimes we also ask people from outside that pool of reviewers when specific expertise is wanted. There are aspects of this arrangement that are not ideal, but I think every model of peer review has its problems. I am not sure what might be the future of peer review and this is a very hot topic of discussion at meetings and on social media, etc, but it seems to me that quite a few alternatives have been tried now without a lot of success or popularity so maybe we've got a workable if not perfect system with which we're probably stuck for the time being, or at least until somebody comes up with something better.

Ksenija Baždarić