Ethics: an absolute or conditional issue?

Behrooz Astaneh
Medical Journalism Department, Paramedical School, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran, astanehb@yahoo.com

Abstract
No research can be published in medical journals without considering ethical issues, no matter what the research question, how robust the methodology, how important the results, or how fascinating the language. An unanswered question is whether ethics is an absolute universal issue with similar meaning in different parts of the world, or circumstances such as law, culture, and resources can change its interpretation?
Keywords: Ethics, medical publishing, guidelines

Medical research and publishing have always involved ethical considerations and raised ethical issues. Ethics is particularly important in medical research because ignoring it may put human health and even lives in danger. The same is true for animal studies. A number of international editorial organisations have been established, stressing the importance of adhering to standard ethical guidelines in designing, performing and reporting medical research. One of the organisations is the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), whose Code of Conduct for Editors, Reviewers, and Publishers has been adapted and used all over the world[1].

Medical editors worldwide have been trained to assess submitted manuscripts based on the originality of the research question, the validity of the methodology used to answer that question, the integrity of the obtained results, and the fairness and balance of the conclusions. However, all these elements should be assessed along with adherence to ethical standards. In other words, ethics is not a luxury but a necessity. No research can be published in medical journals without considering ethical issues, no matter what the research question, how robust the methodology, how important the results, or how fascinating the language[2].

But what does ethics mean exactly? Are ethical principles universal and apply equally all over the world, or does their interpretation and application differ depending on circumstances and human judgment? I believe that different societies and communities interpret the principles differently. This means, in addition to intentional wrong-doing and lack of knowledge, there is a third reason for ethical misconduct, which is misinterpretation.

Standard ethical guidelines have been established by societies with sufficient resources and stable communities. In other communities where the meanings of "life", "security", and "promotion" are totally different, why should we expect "ethics" to be an exception? Culture, resources, and even politics can affect ethical approaches in different countries and can redefine the meaning of ethics.

Regarding culture for example, some developing, many Eastern, and almost all Muslim countries highly value respect for the elders and seniors. Seniors in such communities act as mentors rather than the usual professors, heads of projects, or research supervisors. They believe that their name should be added to the list of authors of any manuscript written by their student (mentee) because the mentees owe their knowledge to their mentors. So they do not believe themselves as "guest authors" but the "owners" of whatever knowledge has been transferred to the brain of their students, which has ultimately been shaped as a manuscript. Based on assumptions such as this, many seniors believe that omitting their name from the authors list is "unethical". In other words, even though their assumed authorship may not comply with western standards, they firmly believe their behaviour is ethical[3]. Another cultural issue in such societies is the "Culture of Compliments". It is very hard to say "NO" to friends, colleagues, and relatives[4]. In societies where familial and tribal relations override orders and regulations, any breach of this old tradition is considered unethical.

Constraints on resources in many countries may also lead to unethical behaviour. Laboratory kits are used in many medical studies. High standard kits are mostly manufactured by factories located in western countries. In many low-resource or sanctioned countries, researchers may not have access to expensive kits that would ensure the necessary robustness of results. Academic pressure however, forces some researchers to perform their studies with insufficient means and produce the so called "sloppy" science. The other bad choice for such researchers is to manipulate insufficient data, usually by multiplying results. It is unethical to perform research with insufficient laboratory kits and then multiply the insufficient findings, but these researchers believe they have every moral right to stay present in literature. I have heard some regional researchers comment on whether it is ethical to produce sloppy science as follows: "Yes, because I cannot change my country's economy but I still have the right to live and promote myself". Such responses show how the human brain may rationalise wrong-doing in sophisticated situations.

Politics and international relations can also affect the way we interpret ethical issues. Iran has been under the US and EU sanctions for many years. Misreading the regulations issued by the sanctioning countries[5], some journal editors rejected papers by authors based in Iran, even though most ethical guidelines say that no manuscript can be rejected on the grounds of race, sex, culture, and origin of the authors. In other words, they face a dilemma whether to observe one code of conduct (which is standard ethical guidelines) or "law", however distasteful they may find it. The key issue here is whether "law" is above "ethics" or the other way around. However, while ethics might be interpreted differently by the "editors" and "publishers" as gatekeepers of science, how can we expect that researchers should all observe ethical guidelines? Some may even have their own version of ethics; for example, double submission

can save time in case of rejection for the "unethical" reasons mentioned above. "Sloppy science" is a logical consequence of placing scientists between the anvil of limitations caused by international policies and sanctions and the hammer of the pressure to publish. In such conditions, it is only human to rationalise and twist one's own perception of an unethical act as an ethical one, thus blurring the distinction between the two.

Conflict of interest

Behrooz Astaneh lives in Iran, which is currently under international sanctions.

Disclosure

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Viewpoint

Translation of titles – to be or not to be?

Marin Vodanovic

University of Zagreb, School of Dental Medicine, Department of Dental Anthropology, Zagreb, Croatia; vodanovic@sfzg.hr

The title and the abstract are considered the two most important parts of a scientific paper, having great influence on the reader's first impression and their decision to read further[1]. Jacques and Sebire showed that the construction of an article title has a significant impact on how frequently the paper is cited[2]. Paiva *et al.* found that short titles presenting results or conclusions were independently associated with higher citation counts[3]. The EASE guidelines give the same recommendations about how an ideal title should sound: unambiguous, understandable to specialists in other fields, reflect the content of the article and it should be specific, not general or vague[4].

The importance of structure, length and informativeness of the title is well known, but what about translation of titles to local languages? There could be three points of view: local reader's point of view, the global reader's point of view and the publisher's point of view. From the local reader's point of view, titles of scientific papers translated into their language might be useful, but surely this is not crucial for further reading – especially if translation of rest of the paper is missing. From the global reader's point of view, translation of the title into local languages is of little importance. From the publisher's point of view, translating titles into local languages is a complex issue, requiring comprehensive analysis and broad interpretation in light of the aims and scopes of each journal. In general, translation of titles into local language forces science editors and translators to develop scientific and professional terminology in their native language, which is very important in fast-changing and developing scientific fields that use a growing number of new terms. But it must be carefully done to avoid the trap of inaccurate and inadequate translations which can cause more damage than benefit. Careful translation of titles is time-consuming and hard to organise, and the only proper way of obtaining high-quality translations of new terms is a close cooperation between local language experts and scientific editors and translators. Translating titles and abstracts is usually not enough to preserve and develop scientific terminology in the local language. For greater impact, full-text papers should be translated into local languages. Unfortunately, this increases the costs of publishing, which is unacceptable for a majority of journals especially in this time of limited financial possibilities. Publication of bilingual journals (ie in English and a local language) should be supported by scientific authorities in non-English-speaking countries.

The English language has become the lingua franca of science. This makes scientific communication easier and faster, but has a potentially irreversible adverse influence on scientific terminology in local languages, which could potentially disappear altogether. In my opinion, this should be avoided. Publishers have an opportunity and responsibility to prevent this by supporting translation of scientific content into local languages. It is a challenge for authors, publishers, readers and the whole community.

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