

2nd June 2017

Dr Virginia Barbour
Board Chair
Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)
c/o Iratxe Puebla

Dear Dr Barbour

Complaint: Actions of the publisher Taylor & Francis (T&F) regarding the International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health (IJOEH).

We write to lodge a formal complaint against the actions of the publisher Taylor & Francis (T&F) regarding the International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health (IJOEH). We are all members of the current Editorial Board, several past members, and the founding editor. Dr David Egilman was Editor-in-chief until his contract ended in December 2016, whereupon the Publisher unilaterally appointed a new editor, Dr Andrew Maier.

We corresponded with T&F about our concerns (correspondence attached). We have not received satisfactory responses. We then discovered additional improprieties that are violations of the COPE codes. Therefore, we lodge this complaint.

Our concerns are:

1. In April 2017, publisher unilaterally retracted a paper published 12 months previously in IJOEH. The paper was authored by the previous editor, Dr Egilman and published after peer review in 2016 [IJOEH 22(1):18-26]. The manuscript had been reviewed for publication under COPE Guidelines. Published IJOEH review processes for manuscripts submitted by an editor or member of the editorial board were followed.

No reasons for retraction were given despite repeated requests. The Managing Director for T&F journals said that the article had been “inadvertently published before the review process was completed, and was subsequently decided to be unsuitable for publication.” Dr Maier confirmed he had had no involvement in the decision to withdraw the paper nor were any Editorial Board members consulted. The Publisher alone decided that the paper was unsuitable and instituted an undisclosed, post-hoc review to justify the retraction.

2. This violates COPE guidelines:
 - i. Publishers should foster editorial independence and support journal editors¹ in following the COPE Code of Conduct for Editors. The latter confirms that new Editors should not overturn previous decisions to publish ‘unless serious problems are identified,’² that decisions on publication should be made “without interference from the publisher”³ and that the ‘relationship of editors to publishers ... should be based firmly on the principle of editorial independence.’⁴ A publisher that withdraws a paper without providing reasons and bypasses both the editor-in-chief and editorial board undermines editorial independence.

¹ See COPE Code of Conduct for Journal Publishers: bullets 7 and 3

² Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guideline for Journal Editors: 3.3

³ Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guideline for Journal Editors: 6.2

⁴ Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guideline for Journal Editors: 6.1

- ii. The retraction by the Publisher violates COPE guidelines. No reasons are provided⁵; the unsupported conclusion that the publication was ‘unsuitable’ is not consistent with the specific criteria in the guidelines justifying retraction: misconduct or error leading to unreliable findings; redundant publication, plagiarism, unethical research⁶. Retraction is reserved for extreme cases of scientific misconduct or findings so wrong as to be misleading⁷ - neither applies here. The publishers also undermined the requirement that the editor “should always have the final decisions about retracting material.”⁸ The guidelines also envisage retraction a last resort after all other efforts have failed.⁹ A sudden unilateral, unexplained decision by the Publisher is incompatible with the guidelines.
 - iii. COPE guidelines for publishers indicate that “publishers should work with journal editors to... publish corrections, clarifications, and retractions.”¹⁰ The Publisher failed to engage either the Editor-in-Chief or the Editorial Board.
3. The Publisher also indicated that a further “three publications accepted under Dr Egilman’s tenure for publication, have been flagged up as raising potential concerns.” COPE Guidelines state clearly that a new editor “should not overturn decisions to publish submissions made by the previous editor unless serious problems are identified.”¹¹ No such evidence has been provided. It appears that the Publisher, with or without the involvement of the new Editor-in-Chief, is acting in disregard of this guideline.
 4. The Publisher implied that legal/libel issues are at stake in the “flagged” papers but declined to disclose even the identities of the papers to the Editorial Board, even confidentially. This violates the guidelines that editors should “champion freedom of expression¹²,” “preclude business needs from compromising intellectual standards¹³” and “maintain the integrity of the academic record¹⁴”.
 5. The Publisher also confirmed they wish to reposition the journal (called a ‘change of tack’), which they already started doing without informing or consulting the Editorial Board. This disregards COPE’s guidelines which identifies the need to keep editorial board members “updated on new policies” and recommends as best practice “consulting editorial board members periodically ... to gauge their opinions about the running of the journal, informing them of any changes to journal policies...”¹⁵

We trust that COPE will act on this matter and would be happy to provide further details upon request.

Yours sincerely

Leslie London (on behalf of the full list of signatories below)

⁵ See Retraction Guidelines – bullet 7 under “notices of retraction”

⁶ See Retraction Guidelines – bullets 1 to 4 in the first paragraph under “Journal editors should consider retracting a publication if...”

⁷ See Retraction Guidelines – third paragraph, page 3.

⁸ See Retraction Guidelines – first paragraph, page 4.

⁹ Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guideline for Journal Editors: 11.4 and 11.5

¹⁰ Code of Conduct for Journal Publishers: page 1, bullet 7

¹¹ Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guideline for Journal Editors: 3.3

¹² COPE Code of Conduct, 2008; General duties and responsibilities of editors: bullet 4

¹³ COPE Code of Conduct, 2008; General duties and responsibilities of editors: bullet 6

¹⁴ COPE Code of Conduct, 2008; General duties and responsibilities of editors: bullet 5

¹⁵ Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guideline for Journal Editors: 5.1, bullet 4

Current IJOEH editorial board members

Arthur Frank
Morris Greenberg
James Huff
Tushar Kant Joshi
Barry S. Levy
Leslie London
David Madigan
Jock McCulloch
Rene Mendes
Iman Nuwayhid
Domyung Paek
Alison Reid
Ellen Roskam
Vilma S Santana
Ken Takahashi
Jukka Takala
Benedetto Terracini
Andrew Watterson
David Wegman

Past IJOEH Editorial Board members

Barry Castleman
Thomas Gassert
Peter Infante
Rob McConnell
Ron Melnick
Daniel Teitelbaum
Jung-Der Wang
Catharina Wesseling

Founding Editor-in-Chief

Joseph LaDou