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En masse resignation of members of science journal's editorial board

Scientific interference by publisher Taylor & Francis in editorial decisions for the International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health

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WASHINGTON, DC -- The entire 22-member editorial board of the International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health (IJOEH) resigned today in protest of interference by the journal's publisher Taylor & Francis. The Board announced its decision today, citing numerous violations of the code of conduct guidelines issued by the Committee on Publication Ethics for Journal Publishers. On Thursday, November 16, 2017, the Board sent a letter to the National Library of Medicine (NLM) that urges the institution to remove the IJOEH from the NLM's list of journals indexed for MEDLINE.

"Taylor & Francis pays attention to their journals' 'impact factor,'" said Arthur Frank, MD, PhD, a professor of environmental and occupational health at Health at Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health. Dr. Frank is a member of IJOEH's editorial board. "IJOEH's impact factor will fall if it is removed from MEDLINE as has been requested. We are taking these unprecedented measures because Taylor & Francis has failed to address the Board's concerns," Frank said.

In their letter to the NLM, the editorial board identifies several reasons for their request of the NLM. They include Taylor & Francis'

- (1) failure to consult with or receive the consent of the editorial board in its decision to dismiss the journal's editor-in-chief;
- (2) failure to consult with and receive the consent of the editorial board in its appointment of a new editor-in-chief;
- (3) appointment of an editor-in-chief who has significant industry ties and has not shown high regard to protect the health of workers;
- (4) assault on academic freedom by its unilateral retraction of papers and failure to inform or involve the editor-in-chief or the editorial board in the retractions; and

(5) inaccurate statement about consultation with an IJOEH editorial board member regarding the editor-in-chief's position.

Taylor & Francis' actions are inconsistent with the code of conduct guidelines issued by the Committee on Publication Ethics for Journal Publishers.

"Throughout its existence, IJOEH has published a number of well-documented scientific critiques of improper actions by corporate representatives and consultants concerning occupational and environmental hazards and risks," said David H. Wegman, M.D., MSc, professor emeritus in the Department of Work Environment at UMass Lowell and adjunct professor at Harvard School of Public Health. "The published paper summarily 'withdrawn' by the publisher described efforts to aid Union Carbide in reducing liabilities from asbestos." Dr. Wegman is a member of IJOEH's editorial board.

The editorial board's letter to the NLM indicates that Taylor & Francis has "acted in a profoundly unethical fashion." They include a copy of the complaint they filed in June 2, 2017 with the Committee on Publication Ethics. The complaint described the publisher's unilateral retraction of a paper published 12 months previously in IJOEH. Neither the editor-in-chief nor the editorial board was involved in the decision. "The Publisher alone decided that the paper was unsuitable and instituted an undisclosed, post-hoc review to justify the retraction," the complaint notes.

According to the complaint, Taylor & Francis is also considering the retraction of three other publications which were accepted under the previous editor-in-chief's tenure. This would be another violation of COPE's guidelines which state that a new editor "should not overturn decisions to publish submissions made by the previous editor unless serious problems are identified." The publisher has not only refused to identify the three papers, it has not disclosed to the editorial board its review process.

"It is the unanimous opinion of the 22 member IJOEH editorial board that Taylor & Francis' actions are an assault on editorial independence," said professor Leslie London, MBChB MMed MD, associate director of the Occupational and Environmental Health Research, University of Cape Town, South Africa. Dr. London is a member of the journal's editorial board. "We urge the NLM to respond favorably and swiftly to our request. Failing to do so emboldens the influence of corporations on medical journals which will have dire consequences for public health."

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