Much has been, and continues to be, written about ethical issues in scientific publishing and biomedical and other research. In the case of publishing, the ethical issues involved apply to all disciplines of science and medicine, the discussion of which in various scientific and medical journals has for more than a decade now been prompted by cases of scientific misconduct on the part of some authors, the severity of which has varied from fraud through plagiarism to double publications and lesser misdemeanours such as 'honorary' authorship and 'salami' publications. The severest of these examples of misconduct cannot be totally prevented, particularly if the offender is determined to succeed, though some helpful suggestions have been made (Royal College of Physicians of London, 1991; Lock, 1995). We could therefore only hope in the meantime that vigilance on the part of editors and also referees will go some way towards their 'early detection' and hence prevention. The scientific and medical communities, however, have a better chance of eradicating the lesser offences through concerted effort and reasoned discussion amongst themselves. Jones (1996) in this issue of *Alcohol and Alcoholism* discusses the background to these misdemeanours and suggests some remedies. Many of the suggestions and other points discussed can and should be debated by the scientific and medical communities, whose views will be welcome in the pages of this journal.

It could be said in defence of the 'minor' offenders that scientific and medical academics have found themselves the victims of a system that has evolved gradually, perhaps as a consequence of the politico-economic climate of the last quarter of this century, which has forced them into what is best described colloquially as a 'rat-race'. There is now the keenest ever competition for ever-decreasing funds needed to support research which will help the investigator's career through promotion and reward. New jargon (such as the 'impact factor' of journals and assessment exercises for 'scoring' by academic departments) arrived during the past decade or so and established itself as the vogue of academia. The academic is now preoccupied with these issues and spends more time than ever on research grant applications (as well as on teaching), rather than on research itself. The scientist is now living in a stressful climate which provides the ideal ground for the practice of the above 'minor' offences. The tragedy and irony of this situation are that the scientist is now following unscientific methods in pursuing his or her career.

A system which places emphasis on quantity (of publications), rather than quality, not only is directly responsible for these 'minor' offences and, in extreme, but fortunately rare, cases, more serious ones, but will also result in continually diminishing academic standards. This trend has to be reversed by concerted effort at all levels if standards are to be maintained. University bodies and politicians should rethink their strategies in the interest of standards and good practice. The practice recently adopted by some universities requesting candidates for professorships and other posts to limit their bibliographies submitted in support of their applications to the best 10 or so papers is a good start. Heads of academic departments and of research groups should take the lead and set a good example. The other unscientific procedure with which academics are preoccupied, the so-called 'impact factor' (IF) for journals, is not all that accurate, representative or bias-free. Quotation of published material, on which the IF is based, is an arbitrary measure subject to too many biases and influences (many of which have nothing whatsoever to do with science), could not be used in comparisons across disciplines or even of specialties within a single area and, worse still, can hinder an academic's chance of securing a job (Jones, 1993; Metcalfe, 1995; Motta, 1995). We all know in our own disciplines which are the good journals and which are not as good. Do we need a computer to tell
us? What did we do before the advent of this gimmick?

Now the case against the 'minor' offender. The practices of awarding authorship for, instead of giving acknowledgement to, those who did not actively contribute to the work of the paper, and of the so-called 'salami' and also repetitive publications are unacceptable. Possible remedies have been suggested and guidelines proposed (see, e.g., Huth, 1986a,b; Jones, 1996 and references cited therein), yet little has so far been achieved at local, national or international levels. Specific mechanisms have also been suggested (Royal College of Physicians of London, 1991) to root out these undesirable practices and to safeguard those who expose them. The research community must act sooner, rather than later, to arrest the progress of the offenders, and editors are well placed to take an initiative, though they alone clearly cannot solve the problem. There has to be at least a two-way, if not a three-way interaction between journal editors and members of the research community and their official and professional organizations.

Another area of particular ethical concern is the sphere of alcoholism and other drug dependence research. The Editors of Addiction (Edwards et al., 1995) have recently raised issues related to publishing in the addiction field, some of which are also pertinent to the above discussion, and so we may compare notes. When considering a medium for discussing ethical issues specific to and concerning alcohol and alcoholism research in some detail, this journal is the obvious choice, and I am therefore pleased also to welcome the Review by Plant et al. (1996) in this issue of Alcohol and Alcoholism. These latter authors discuss a range of issues of major ethical importance in this field and in particular the relationships between alcohol researchers and their sponsors and funders. The area of alcohol research is a highly politicized one and its multifaceted nature lends itself to ethical enquiry. The editorial team thus welcomes debate of these specific issues in the pages of Alcohol and Alcoholism. Edwards et al. (1995) stated that 'currently it is the tobacco and alcohol manufacturers which are most purposefully attempting to influence the (game)' and suggested that 'insistence on openness will provide the best safeguard against industry influences'. We insist on openness and, as far as Alcohol and Alcoholism is concerned, I am pleased to say that we have never experienced any such influences. I can state categorically that no pressure whatsoever from the alcohol industry nor anyone else has been brought to bear at any time on the editorial independence of, or any editorial or related activities by, myself or any member of the editorial team, nor on my predecessors (with whom I have very recently discussed this issue), namely Dr Allan D. Thomson during his 12-year editorship between 1980 and 1991 and Dr Myrddin Evans who has been involved with this journal from its inception as a Newsletter in 1965 till the end of his editorship in 1979.

Three points raised by the Plant et al. (1996) Review merit an immediate response. The first concerns these authors' reservations about the anonymous peer reviewing process. This journal does not have any problems in this regard. Almost all peer review criticisms of submitted typescripts have been valid and constructive; nothing less would be acceptable to us. In fact, during my 18-year association with this journal, I have never come across any peer review that carried any personal criticisms of, nor defamatory comments on, authors. Second, Plant et al. (1996) propose that an audit exercise on papers should be undertaken by this and related journals. The Editorial team of Alcohol and Alcoholism welcomes the initiation of such an exercise at double the rate suggested! The third suggestion by Plant et al. (1996) is that of establishing an ethical authority, through one or a group of alcoholism journals and/or appropriate agencies, to draw up a formal ethical code. This journal also welcomes this suggestion and would be very happy to work towards this goal in close association with other journals in the field. Extensive consultations will be necessary for the success of such a proposal, and the views of our readership on this and indeed any of the points discussed in this Editorial and the Invited Commentary and Review appearing in this issue of Alcohol and Alcoholism will therefore be welcome. The editorial team thus looks forward to a lively debate in the coming months.

REFERENCES


