Publication ethics and human reproduction

Ideas of ethical practice within scientific publications have been progressively evolving with standards of practice becoming recognized internationally. Editors of scientific journals face, on occasions, examples of apparent misconduct on which they must attempt to adjudicate against these standards of practice. In some cases there is good reason to suspect that there has simply been a lack of knowledge or a misunderstanding of what is regarded as appropriate practice, but in others the authors appear to understand the rules of publication ethics but contravene them. In some cases this may be because they do not regard those rules as important, in others it may involve an intention to mislead.

It is no easy task for an editor to dissect cases when they are brought to attention, something that often occurs by accident during the refereeing process or beyond. At Human Reproduction I am able to call on the views of the ESHRE Publications subcommittee where there are difficult examples of possible misconduct to consider and in our consideration we have found the publications of the Committee of Publication Ethics (COPE) to be very helpful. COPE was set up in 1997 by Michael Farthing, the current Chairman, Richard Smith, Editor of the British Medical Journal and Richard Horton, Editor of the Lancet, and has the declared objective to ‘provide a sounding board for editors who were struggling with how best to deal with possible breaches in research and publication ethics’. The COPE Report 2000 indicates that COPE is in discussion with the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) on collaboration including posting the COPE Guidelines on Good Publication Practice (1999) on the WAME website.

I have the impression that most cases of possible publication misconduct which I have had to consider over the past year at Human Reproduction would have been avoidable if the authors had ready access to the COPE Guidelines. In order to ensure that our readers and authors understand the current recommendations for practice in this field we are publishing the 1999 COPE Guidelines on Good Publication Practice in this issue of Human Reproduction (Appendix) and we strongly urge you to read them. I hope that this will be a help in clarifying the current international standard.

David H. Barlow
Editor-in-Chief