LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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Re: Ethical studies, ethical publication

Dear Sir,

I was pleased to see that Occupational Medicine thought it appropriate to publish an editorial on ethical publication [1]. It is important that the ethics of research and publication remain in the consciousness of occupational physicians. This is particularly so where they are actively involved in occupational medicine research and therefore the ethical treatment of workers who participate in studies.

It is important to remember the real anguish and despair felt by UK nuclear workers, and their families, following the publication, without prior worker briefings, of a study suggesting a causal relationship between radiation dose to fathers at work and the incidence of leukaemia in their offspring in 1990 [2]. Occupational physicians involved in the support of such workers were subsequently in the forefront of developing appropriate ethical protection. Over the years, this led to agreements with the editors of UK medical journals, such as the British Medical Journal, that studies of this type would not be published without prepuplication information to the study participants. This led, in turn, to the inclusion of a specific section on research in the UK Faculty of Occupational Medicine’s Guidance on Ethics for Occupational Physicians, the 5th edition in 1999 [3]. This made it clear that the handling of results, including prepublication briefings and publication itself, should be agreed in advance as part of the protocol. The results may not always be those anticipated, and the presentation of them should not depend on the outcome.

In addition, there are important questions of ownership of data in worker studies and whichever data sets can be used for these purposes or pooled without revisiting worker consent. Speaking personally, I think it is vitally important that these principles, once established, are not lost or forgotten.

It is of course possible for Occupational Medicine to check compliance with some of these aspects of ethics in relation to the articles it receives for publication. They are not as yet, however, areas covered by Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines.

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References