EDITORIAL

Human Reproduction—the next phase in its development

When I took up the position of Editor-in-Chief of this journal, I did not entirely know what to expect from the experience, but I did know that my role as Editor-in-Chief would last for 3 years, with a possible extension of a further 3. This has the advantages that the journal can have renewal of the Editor-in-Chief role at predictable intervals with the input of ideas from this role being regularly refreshed. My 6 years in office has seen substantial progress in terms of reviewing efficiency, speed to online publication and increasing submissions and impact factors. It has been a rewarding experience. In preparation for the ending of my second term, the position was advertised, and it is a great pleasure to congratulate Professor André Van Steirteghem on his appointment as the next Editor-in-Chief of Human Reproduction, starting in January 2007. With his outstanding contribution to the field and extensive publication record, Professor André Van Steirteghem needs little introduction except to say that he enhances my confidence for the future of the journal. Throughout this year, he has served as one of the journal’s Deputy Editors along with Professor Piergiorgio Crosignani and Professor John Collins. The introduction of this innovative Editorial team is already proving its worth as the Deputy Editors assist the Editor-in-Chief in the task of steering the journal towards its goal of being one of the world’s leading journals in the field of reproduction. Recently, with the continuing increase in submitted papers, it has become necessary to reject some papers that have satisfied the referees that they could be published, but the review process has not awarded a high priority rating. The Deputy Editors are therefore providing an invaluable service to the journal in the very necessary task of supporting the Editor-in-Chief in the process of discrimination amongst acceptable papers and selection of those with the highest importance and priority for publication.

The other aspect of the work of the Editor-in-Chief where the accumulated wisdom of the Deputy Editors is of great value is in relation to the adjudication of cases of possible publishing misconduct. The international standards relating to publication misconduct are now well established, and sadly each year, the journal has to deal with a number of cases of proved or suspected misconduct. As Editor-in-Chief, I have carried the ultimate responsibility for reaching decisions that apply rigorous standards with consistency of the actions taken by the journal yet ensuring fairness. I am now well supported in this duty by the Deputy Editors, who bring with them their wealth of experience to this challenging task. The standards required are disseminated through the work of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), whose website is a valuable source of guidance for the community of authors (http://www.publicationethics.org.uk/). Although the pattern of problems encountered differs from year to year, we have had concerns recently over cases involving plagiarism, double publication and possible data manipulation. It is of great importance that authors realize that the internationally agreed standards are in place for important reasons and that understanding and complying with these rules of conduct are essential skills that clinicians and scientists need to encompass as part of being involved in research.

Issues around plagiarism tend to centre on the use of text from the work of other authors without attribution, and we are encountering the excuse that the cut and pasted text was such a good description of what the authors wanted to say that they felt justified to use it. This is clearly not permitted without the authors of the text used being attributed, and without it being clearly acknowledged by use of quotation marks. Imperfect command of English on the part of the authors is not an acceptable excuse. We have encountered examples of considerable ‘borrowings’ of the text of others, and anyone considering doing this must realize that although such ‘borrowing’ has never been easier to carry out because of computers, it is also considerably easier now to detect such plagiarism because of computer search methods. In a recent case, the degree of plagiarism from two different sources was so extensive that it has been necessary to retract the paper (see Notice of Retraction in this issue).

We have also been concerned about recent examples of attempted double publication without any indication to the reader that the two papers represent the same, or very similar, work. There will be occasions where an author wishes to address two distinct readerships, perhaps one in an international English language journal and one in a local non-English language journal. This may be acceptable if the authors inform the relevant Editors that this is the case and make it abundantly clear in the secondary publication that it has already been
published in whole or in part, stating the primary reference, but not otherwise. If two papers using the same data appear in two journals with no indication that they represent the same work, then the scientific community may be led to believe that the findings reported in the papers confirm each other and add inappropriate weight to the findings. Double publication may not involve identical papers in two journals but may be the publication of two papers where the data are only slightly different without any indication in the second paper that the data overlap with the first paper. This question over the extent of data overlap merges into another form of publication misconduct that is often referred to as 'salami slicing', where authors attempt to obtain a series of papers from a study by releasing different aspects of the data in a sequence of papers. Where the extent of the previous published work is clearly indicated and cross-referenced in the subsequent paper in the sequence, then this is not misconduct, but the authors run the significant risk that a journal will decline to publish the paper because it does not contain sufficient new data. On the contrary, it is misconduct to conceal that the previous papers have been published. Time after time, referees will pick up these points and report them to the journal. Indeed, in some subject areas you may find that, by chance, the same referee is asked to look at the multiple papers, and as a result, the misconduct becomes very clear. The answer is that authors should have a good justification for seeking to publish work twice and must absolutely indicate what they are doing, and why, to the journals involved. The journal can then make the decision armed with the relevant facts.

Although rare, one of the most difficult and serious forms of unethical publication is that involving data. It is vitally important for the readers that where inappropriate use of data is alleged (fabrication, manipulation and falsification), this is dealt with properly. It is also crucially important that an author suspected of data fabrication has these suspicions dealt with properly. The journal is not in a position (nor should it be) to undertake such in-depth investigations, and when allegations are received, we would normally ask the host institution to formally investigate. The journal will certainly decline to publish any work under scrutiny and if already published would consider issuing a retraction.

With the evolution of publishing standards in the scientific community, we are making changes to our procedures, in line with other leading journals, around authorship and the registration of clinical trials.

The developing standard regarding the justification of authorship is an issue that has now come to prominence and where it is not clear that throughout the scientific community, the practice is fully understood. Human Reproduction adheres to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) guidelines regarding ‘Authorship and Contributorship’ (see http://www.icmje.org/index.html#author). In line with the required standards, we have revised our Instructions to Authors to request that authors indicate their individual contributions to the paper. The journal allows a maximum of 10 authors. The justification for authorship would include (i) substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; (ii) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (iii) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions (i), (ii) and (iii).

There has been recognition for many years that there is potential for publication bias in the field of clinical trials around the tendency for positive trials to be more likely to achieve publication and the belief that some trials that are carried out never get to publication, whether because the authors met with repeated rejections or because they did not seek to publish. The latter, in itself, can be considered as bad research practice. These problems are being addressed by the establishment of Clinical Trials registration databases where researchers are encouraged to register a trial at the outset so that it will be possible for the community to know of all trials that have been carried out or are currently under way, when examining the evidence base. Following the lead of the ICMJE, these and other leading journals have declared that they will only publish clinical trials that have been registered (at the enrolment stage) with one of the growing number of international trial registries. Currently, there are five ICMJE-recognized registries (http://www.icmje.org/faq.pdf), but this number will continue to grow.

We believe that there needs to be a transitional phase where trials currently under way will be permitted to register retrospectively. The journal has decided that a good way forward is to recognize the need for this transition period, but from January 2007, we shall require that authors of trials must provide a registration number from one of the major databases before their paper can be considered for publication in Human Reproduction. The trial registration number will be published at the end of the abstract in accordance with ICMJE recommendations. Our Instructions to Authors will be updated to indicate this change.

Since January 2006, the journal has been participating in the ‘Oxford Open’ initiative whereby authors have the opportunity to pay an ‘open access’ publication charge to make their paper freely available online immediately after it has been accepted and type-set for publication. Further information can be obtained from (http://www.oxfordjournals.org/oxfordopen/). It is important to understand that the author’s decision on whether to pay for ‘open access’ occurs after the review process is complete, and indeed the editorial team are unaware of this transaction. The authors who chose to pay for the Oxford Open option are also entitled to deposit the final published version of their paper onto an institutional or subject-based repository immediately upon publication. Further information can be obtained from (http://www.oxfordjournals.org/access_purchase/self-archiving_policy.html). It is interesting to note that a significant number of authors have already taken up this option and the first wave of open-access articles is identified on ‘Advance Access’ and in the printed journals from Volume 21 (issue 6) onwards.

As is clear from this Editorial, there is continuing development in scientific publishing both in standards and in technology. Human Reproduction will continue to seek to ensure that publishing in our field keeps abreast of the necessary developments, and as the journal moves into its next phase under the direction of its new Editor-in-Chief, I believe that we can have
confidence that it will continue to provide readers, authors and ESHRE with the highest quality of performance they desire.

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