

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Ethical Considerations In Instructions To Authors Of Some Journals Published In Cameroon.

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#### Abstract

#### Background/Aim

With increased public awareness on research ethics in Cameroon and the world over, the role of editors and publishers of scientific journals in promoting good ethical practices in scientific research cannot be minimized.

This study had as objective to check if the “instructions to authors” of journals published in Cameroon, reflect the rising need for the maintenance of high ethical standards in the conduct and reporting of scientific research.

#### Method

The “instruction to authors” of nine journals published in Cameroon were reviewed for ethical considerations. The “instructions to authors” of these journals were then compared to some journals published out of Cameroon.

#### Results

11.11% of the journals will not publish articles that were being considered for publication elsewhere. 22.22% required that a statement be made, if ethical clearance had been obtained. 11.11% of the journals required that studies involving humans be conducted according to an international guideline. 22.22% of the journals stated the need for the corresponding author to sign a document certifying that ethical considerations were respected. 22.22% of the journals stated the need for the submitting authors to approve of the paper being submitted. 22.22% of the journals had as a requirement, the declaration of conflict of interest.

#### Conclusions

This study reveals that editors/publishers of journals published in Cameroon are interested in maintaining high ethical standards in their journals, however there is a need for editors and publishers to introduce or revise the “ethics section” in their instructions to authors, to meet up with international standards.

**Keywords:** ‘Instruction to authors”, journals, Cameroon, ethics

## Introduction

Publication of a scientific article usually follows months and even several years of planning, research and analysis of research findings. It is therefore expected that such work be conducted and reported honestly, objectively and fairly. However, in some instances, deviations from this ideal occur<sup>1</sup>. Publishing the results of a scientific study in a journal is one of the many ways of disseminating research findings used by a majority of researchers and it is an ethical obligation for every researcher to make public, the results of their research findings. This medium of communicating Publications are usually central to the evaluation and validation of any research and researcher, and in some societies it is used as a means of survival in a highly competitive science field where there is a need for such publications to get academic promotion and advancement<sup>2</sup>. In the process of publishing a journal, a number of ethical issues may arise from both the editorial and the scientific communities. Some of these ethical breaches include: Failure to obtain approval from an Ethics Review Committee (ERC), failure to obtain informed consent from research participants, Guest or ghost or even denial of authorship, conflict of interest, duplicate publications, plagiarism, confidentiality of research participants etc<sup>3,4</sup>. These ethical breaches could be due to a variety of reasons e.g. the idea of "Publish or Perish", the belief by some researchers that adding the name of a senior researcher in the paper (even when s/he doesn't meet the criteria for authorship) gives more "weight" to the paper and increases its chances of being published, Head of Laboratories and departments wanting their names to be included in all publications coming from the department, financial interest etc<sup>3</sup>

The scientific community is witnessing an increase in the number of scientific publications which is matched by an increase in the number of new journals to meet up with the rising demands. With the developing world experiencing an increase in scientific research studies, public interest for the maintenance of high ethical standards in the conduct and publication of scientific research is also on the rise. Such standards have been proposed by publishers, professional organizations and interested groups<sup>5</sup>. It is essential therefore, for every researcher to be versed with the ethical requirements for conducting scientific studies<sup>1</sup>. It is equally important for editors of medical journals to be cognizant with the ethical and legal issues governing the design, conduct and reporting of scientific studies<sup>6</sup>. World wide, a

number of cases have been reported leading to either the withdrawal of a paper from a journal years after it has been published or the meting out of other sanctions such as a particular journal refusing to publish any article from the author for a number of years. This may have far devastating effects on the career of such researchers, as well as far reaching consequences to the scientific community, who might have used such an article as a basis for further research. Benos et al. 2005<sup>1</sup> identifies: plagiarism, data fabrication and falsification, authorship, redundant and duplicate publication, conflict of interest, respect for animal and human welfare, and reviewer responsibility as the most common type of unethical practices encountered during the process of submission, review and publication of scientific articles.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2008)<sup>7</sup> published the uniform requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: **Writing and Editing for Biomedical Publication**. In this document, they give recommendations on the ethical principles for reviewing, publishing and improving of articles published in biomedical journals as well as advice on the technical aspects of preparing and submitting manuscripts. Some of the ethical considerations raised by this committee include: authorship and contributorship, privacy and confidentiality of research participants, editorship, conflict of interest and protection of human subjects and animals in research.

The UK's Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has equally proposed guidelines on best practices for scientific publishing and some of the issues raised include: plagiarism, study design and ethical approval, redundancy, authorship amongst a host of others ([www.publicationethics.org](http://www.publicationethics.org)). While some of these issues can be handled by the Ethics Review Committees such as the issue of protection of research participants and confidentiality, a number of them are handled by the authorities of the journals such as the issue of authorship and conflict of interest. Besides, even when some of these aspects are handled by ERBs/IRBs there is a need for journal editors to verify and ensure that these aspects were respected in order to prevent the report of unethical research in their journals.

## Method

This paper explores "the instructions to authors" of some Cameroonian journals to check if they consider ethical issues in their formulations. The "instructions to authors" of a number of Cameroon-based journals are

then compared with those of other African and developed countries. The authors looked at the "instructions to authors" of some journals published in Cameroon to determine if their guidelines reflect some of the proposals of these committees/associations as well as the rising public interest in high ethical standards in the conduct and reporting of scientific research. Nine Cameroon Journals were identified using web searches and in some libraries in Cameroon. During the month of July 2009, the "instructions to authors" of the journals were checked and read to find out if they made any reference to ethical guidelines and standards. These journals publish research studies, review articles, short communications, letters to the editor, case studies in either the field of medicine, biomedical sciences, social sciences and agricultural sciences and some were multidisciplinary.

### Results

The "instructions to authors" of all the journals reviewed were different and each addressed the various ethical issues differently. The journals reviewed were published by either faculties in higher institutions of learning or by some scientific associations in Cameroon. All the journals in their "instructions to authors" mentioned an aspect of redundancy/duplication in publication and stated that the journals only publish original articles, some stated that they publish articles that have been presented in scientific meetings provided that more data/material have been added. One (11.11%) of the journals stated that they won't publish articles that are equally being considered for publication in other scientific journals. Two (22.22%) of the journals indicated that if the research involved human subjects or animals or genetically modified organisms that are being released into the environment, a statement should be made if ethical clearance had been obtained from the appropriate authorities. It further states that the editorial committee reserves the right to request for the informed consent or the relevant document showing proof of the statement. One (11.11%) of the journals stated that all studies involving humans must be conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki, while all studies involving animals must state that either the guidelines for the use and care of laboratory animals of the authors institutions or any national law or that of the local research council was respected. Two (22.22%) of the journal stated the need for the corresponding author to sign a document certifying that ethical considerations were respected. Two (22.22%) of the journals stated the

need for the submitting authors to approve of the paper being submitted. All the journals saw the need to properly reference already published articles that are cited in the paper. Two (22.22%) of the journals required the authors to acknowledge and declare sources of conflict of interest such as holding stocks or shares in an organization that may benefit or lose through the publication.

Comparing these instructions to that of a regional journal to which Cameroon is part of, we observed that this journal actually included a section on ethics and stated that when experiments involved the use of humans and animals, it should be mentioned if the experimental procedure was done in accordance with national ethical guidelines and international regulations with respect to that of the 1983 revised versions of the Declaration of Helsinki (1975). These instructions were compared to that of other African journals such as that of the East African Medical Journal, the Central African Medical Journal and the South African Medical Journal. While these journals did not address the ethical issues at same rate, it was realized that, they had a deeper depth than that of Cameroonian journals. Apart from the issue of duplicate and redundant publication, ethical clearance, informed consent and conflict of interest which are mentioned by at least one of the Cameroonian journals, these other African journals included other ethical aspects like: authorship, respect for local ethics committees and international regulations and further gives explanations to many of these ethical issues unlike most of the Cameroon based journals that mention most of the points in a rather superficial manner. Looking at other journals published out of Africa, we observed that they had a broader scope of ethical issues and included aspects like: the role of the study sponsor in the study design and the independence of the researchers from the sponsors and funders.

### Discussion

There is increase awareness in the maintenance of high ethical standards both in the conduct and publication of scientific research. This study tried to investigate if such increased awareness is reflected in the "instructions to authors" of some Cameroonian journals. The results revealed that, the editors/publishers of Cameroonian journals are interested in meeting up with this increase public awareness and demand since they made at least one reference to ethical considerations in their instructions to authors. However, this study shows that the ethical issues included in the "instruction to authors"

of the Cameroonian journals reviewed in this study does not sufficiently meet up with the rising demands for high ethical standards in research studies and publication. All the journals were quite concerned about publication redundancy and duplication. 22.22% of the journals mention the need and even documented proof for ethical clearance and informed consent should the need arise. 22.22% of the journals required a declaration of conflict of interest. Just one journal required that research involving humans should be carried out according to the Declaration of Helsinki. None of the journals mentioned anything on authorship and/or contributorship (However, one of the journals required that all authors signed against their names at the time of submission and the other wanted a co-author agreement. This the authors believe could be one of the ways the journal tries to avoid authorship disputes, though one of the journal stated that this was to indicate approval for submission), plagiarism, confidentiality of research participants, role of sponsors and funders, data fabrication, respect for local ethics committees and independence of the researchers from the sponsors and funders. Even when some of the ethical issues are made, it is only stated superficially unlike the other journals that try to take a deeper look into it. This reveals some laxity on the ethical considerations of journals published in Cameroon as compared to that some journals published out of Cameroon. These may be quite perilous in the nearest future especially in a world where there is an ever growing awareness for ethical issues. These journals could later become recipients and host to articles of studies (national and international) carried out without respect for ethical guidelines.

### Conclusions

There is a great need for editors/publishers of Cameroonian journals to revise and/or improve the ethical considerations in their "instructions to authors" and to emphasis on the need for researchers to respect international guidelines. There are a number of recommendations from researchers and interest groups in this regards. For example the council of Science Editors (previously the Council of Biology Editors) recommends that ethical review be carried out by the editorial board and proof of IRB approval should be one of the criteria

for accepting an article reporting research involving human participants. The uniform requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: **Writing and Editing for Biomedical Publication** provides a good guideline for this. While the authors are not principally suggesting that this guideline is the standard, they however think it could serve as a guide for the identification of gaps in the "instructions to authors" and provide useful insights in addressing the problem. Moreover, training of scientific editors in Cameroon on research ethics will be of great importance, not only with respect to determining the ethical quality of the research they publish, and the integrity of biomedical articles published in their journals but it will go a long way in promoting the respect of research ethics by the scientific community.

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