

Instructional Vignettes in Publication and Journalism Ethics in Radiology Research: Assessment via a Survey of Radiology Trainees

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Rationale and Objectives: The aim of the present study was to assess the potential usefulness of written instructional vignettes relating to publication and journalism ethics in radiology via a survey of radiology trainees.

Materials and Methods: A literature review was conducted to guide the development of vignettes, each describing a scenario relating to an ethical issue in research and publication, with subsequent commentary on the underlying ethical issue and potential approaches to its handling. Radiology trainees at a single institution were surveyed regarding the vignettes' perceived usefulness.

Results: A total of 21 vignettes were prepared, addressing institutional review board and human subjects protection, authorship issues, usage of previous work, manuscript review, and other miscellaneous topics. Of the solicited trainees, 24.7% (16/65) completed the survey. On average among the vignettes, 94.0% of the participants found the vignette helpful; 19.9 received prior formal instruction on the issue during medical training; 40.0% received prior informal guidance from a research mentor; and 42.0% indicated that the issue had arisen in their own or a peer's prior research experience. The most common previously experienced specific issue was authorship order (93.8%). Free-text responses were largely favorable regarding the value of the vignettes, although also indicated numerous challenges in properly handling the ethical issues: impact of hierarchy, pressure to publish, internal politics, reluctance to conduct sensitive conversations with colleagues, and variability in journal and professional society policies.

Conclusion: Radiology trainees overall found the vignettes helpful, addressing commonly encountered topics for which formal and informal guidance were otherwise lacking. The vignettes are publicly available through the Association of University Radiologists (AUR) website and may foster greater insights by investigators into ethical aspects of the publication and journalism process, thus contributing to higher quality radiology research.

Key Words: ethics; biomedical research; academic radiology; education; survey.

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INTRODUCTION

Ensuring the highest quality of science in radiology demands observing the highest of ethical standards throughout the research and publication process. A uniform code of conduct for authors, reviewers, editors, and publishers fosters a consistent and fair process for manuscript selection. In addition, professional journalism standards help to avoid sources of bias in publication and thus improve the

rigor and clinical importance of the work. On the other hand, publication misconduct risks far more than just the authors' reputation, but also dissemination of incorrect or misleading results, thereby leading to inappropriate clinical management and potential patient harm.

Although promoting high ethical and professional standards in radiology journalism is clearly an important objective, numerous challenges toward this aim exist. Although numerous journal and editorial bodies have released professional standards for academic publishing (1,2), no single uniform code of publication ethics exists. This absence can create uncertainty regarding the optimal course of action in an ambiguous circumstance. In addition, insufficient training regarding publication ethics for medical students, residents, and junior faculty may contribute to an overall lack of awareness of such issues (3,4). Moreover, academic pressure to successfully publish the output of one's research efforts can be intense,

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with such productivity having implications for promotions, bonuses, and other end points (5,6). This pressure furthers the need to continually highlight the critical nature of publication ethics.

Ultimately, the current framework for biomedical journalism often depends on trust of the other participants in the process given the absence of a means of systematically identifying various forms of misconduct. That is, authors, reviewers, editors, and others must take personal responsibility to be familiar and comply with general ethical standards. Although journals are seeking measures to improve the degree of transparency throughout the publication process (7,8), success in this regard nonetheless requires individuals to take this area of professionalism highly seriously, seek to become familiar with all aspects of research and publication ethics, and subsequently hold themselves accountable for maintaining these standards. Ultimately, this is a responsibility shared by researchers that is important for respecting and maintaining the integrity of the scientific process itself.

These concerns create a compelling need to promote awareness and comprehension of publication ethics among radiologists. To address this need, instructional vignettes relating to recent and ongoing trends in publication and journalism ethics in radiology were developed. The vignettes are intended to serve as an enduring product, made publicly available to radiologists, as well as other scientific investigators in academic medicine, as a resource to bolster their own insights in this area and reinforce the critical nature of this topic. Our aim in the present report is to assess the potential usefulness of written instructional vignettes relating to publication and journalism ethics in radiology via a survey of radiology trainees.

METHODS

Construction of Vignettes

The senior author developed the written vignettes following a literature review, including the AMA Manual of Style (2), recommendations of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (1), policies on journal websites, editorials from journal editors, and other relevant peer-reviewed articles identified through PubMed searches. Vignettes addressed a single issue related to ethics in biomedical research, with a particular focus on areas pertinent to radiology. The selected topics largely pertained to the publication process, rather than the conduct of the research itself. Vignettes were approximately three pages in length and consisted of the initial description of a scenario in which a researcher is confronted with a potential ethical issue, followed by a commentary on general principles underlying the ethical issue and how the scenario may be handled, including appropriate courses of action for the involved individuals.

Survey of Radiology Trainees

A prospective Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act–compliant institutional review board (IRB)–approved

study was conducted to evaluate the potential usefulness of the vignettes. Survey participants were informed that their completion of the survey served as consent. All radiology residents and fellows at the author’s institution were invited to review the vignettes and complete the survey via a series of three e-mails soliciting participation.

The participants were provided the vignettes in electronic version. For each vignette, participants were asked to indicate in a binary fashion whether the vignette was helpful, whether they had received prior instruction in the issue during medical school or another formal classroom setting, whether they had received prior informal guidance in the issue from a past research mentor or advisor, whether the issue had previously arisen in their own research experience, and whether they were aware of the issue previously arising in any of their peers’ research experiences. The participants were also asked to provide any additional free-text comments regarding the vignette. Finally, they recorded their postgraduate year (PGY) of medical training as well.

Survey responses were assessed using descriptive summary statistics, including percentages of participants responding positively to the questions. The responses were evaluated both at the overall level and at the level of individual vignettes. Responses were also stratified by the participants’ level of training (classified as PGYs 2–4 vs. PGYs 5–6). The responses to the survey’s final two binary questions were grouped to assess

TABLE 1. Topics of the 21 Vignettes in Publication and Journalism Ethics in Radiology Research

- IRB and human subjects protection
 - (1.1) Patient consent for case reports
 - (1.2) Criteria for human subjects research
 - (1.3) Determination of IRB exemption status
 - (1.4) IRB oversight of quality improvement initiatives
- Author issues
 - (2.1) Determination of author order
 - (2.2) Honorary authorship
 - (2.3) Author approval of final submission
 - (2.4) Author verification forms
 - (2.5) Addition of author to manuscript
- Usage of previous work
 - (3.1) Self-plagiarism
 - (3.2) Redundant publication
 - (3.3) Manuscript based on earlier conference abstract
 - (3.4) Alteration of medical images
 - (3.5) Use of previously published image
- Manuscript review process
 - (4.1) Confidentiality of manuscript under review
 - (4.2) Conflict of interest related to manuscript authors
 - (4.3) Conflict of interest related to manuscript content
 - (4.4) Blinding of manuscript during review process
- Miscellaneous
 - (5.1) Disclosures by study investigators
 - (5.2) Representation of manuscript review status
 - (5.3) Permission for acknowledgments

IRB, institutional review board.

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