Reviewer’s report

Title: The Publication of Ethically Uncertain Research: Attitudes and Practices of Journal Editors

Version: 1 Date: 29 November 2011

Reviewer: Jerome Hoffman

Reviewer’s report:

There is a great deal to like about this study, and this manuscript, such that I wish I could recommend it without reservation. The study question is relevant and important, and the methodology is very appropriate. Unfortunately, the study has one substantial limitation, which greatly limits what we can learn from it, and to my mind approaches being a “fatal flaw.”

Because the response rate was only 33%, it is impossible to generalize in just about any way regarding “what editors think” about ethically uncertain research. (It is fair to conclude that refusal to publish ethically uncertain research is not universal among Journal editors … but this is the only conclusion that can fairly be made from this data.) This becomes obvious if one does a simple sensitivity analysis, making alternate assumptions about the attitudes of those editors who did not respond. If, for example, none of them would agree to publish such research, the overall rates would change very little, and your conclusions, as written, would be appropriate. If, on the other hand, a majority (not to mention all) of those who chose not to respond did so at least in part because they would publish ethically uncertain research – and because of social desirability bias chose not to acknowledge this – the actual truth would be dramatically different than what you suggest.

Because it is easily conceivable that the attitudes of those editors who chose not to respond are not in fact similar to those of editors who did answer the survey, it is inappropriate simply to assume that the available results actually reflect what most editors believe (or how they behave). Furthermore, because this is not a qualitative study designed to generate hypotheses, but rather an attempt to determine on a quantitative level how Journal editors actually think/act, this represents an almost insurmountable flaw for this study.

In light of this, I believe the only way in which it should be published (other than if you go back and attempt to obtain a far greater number of responses, of at least somewhere around 80% – which I feel would be optimal, even if very difficult) is if you both soften their current declarative statements about “what Journal editors believe,” to make them much more conditional, and also add a discussion about the implications of the fact that so many Journal editors were unwilling to spend the small amount of time to address this important question – which is one that I believe strikes to the very heart of published medical research.
(As an aside, I believe it is particularly inappropriate for you to make comparisons to the earlier study to which you refer, after you have both justified doing your study, as well as dismissed the reliability of that earlier study, based on the limited survey response rate that they achieved. This would be true even if you yourselves had succeeded in achieving a far higher response rate – since it would in fact be impossible to have any confidence in what most editors actually believed at the time of the previous study. Given your own difficulties in this same area, any comparison – which by necessity ignores the uncertainty about what a majority of editors in both of these eras actually believe – becomes particularly inappropriate.)

**Level of interest:** An exceptional article

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.