Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 8 December 2011

Reviewer: Kenneth A Katz

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript reports results of a survey of journal editors regarding attitudes and practices of publishing ethically uncertain research. This is an interesting and important topic. Of note, I was not given access to the Tables referenced in the manuscript so am not able to comment on them.

Major compulsory revisions

1. The first hypothesis was "that in comparison to the 1977 survey, fewer journal editors would accept ethically uncertain research for publication today." A side-by-side comparison of those results (with or without a statistical test), however, is not presented. This should be done.

2. Selection bias. The authors state that despite a low response rate, "respondents represent a heterogeneous sample of journal editors whose IFs vary... and thus, they appear to reflect the population surveyed as a whole." There is no data besides a range of IFs (and no formal comparison of those IFs to nonrespondents' IFs) to support this assertion. The very real possibility of selection bias should be acknowledged. It's not clear in which direction this would bias the results, although conceivably it could be in either direction.

3. Please explain what the Abridged Index Medicus list of journals is. How are journals chosen for this list? How do these journals compare to the "core" journals studied in 1977?

4. Statistical analyses. Not conducted "given the lack of power." It's not clear if or how the study was powered a priori. The authors should perform the statistical analyses as planned, if at all reasonable; a limitation to be discussed might be that there was limited power to detect significant findings.

5. Please state explicitly what the guidelines of COPE, WAME, and ICMJE are specifically re: publishing ethically uncertain research (if they exist), when those guidelines were published (before or after this survey), and whether these journals surveyed belong to those organizations.

6. Conclusions. The conclusion in the abstract ("editorial obligations... remains difficult to implement in all cases") differs substantially from the body of the article ("a current high degree of consensus that editors would comply with the DOH in rejecting publication of ethically suspect research..."). Consider more consistent
interpretation of the main study findings.

Minor essential revisions

1. It would be useful to include a copy of the questionnaire used in this survey, as well as those used in the 1977 survey. Please include.

2. In the results section, please include denominators throughout, as it becomes difficult to keep track of what the denominators should be.

Discretionary revisions

1. The manuscript could be shortened and tightened. Consider shortening the introduction to introduce the research question and hypothesis sooner.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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