Reviewer’s report

Title: Evaluating ethics oversight during assessment of research integrity

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Reviewer: Bor Luen Tang

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With reference to their recent published article (Grey et al., RIPR, 2019), Grey and colleagues made an additional point in this letter that institutional investigations reported by the authors in their previous paper were glaringly lacking in references to ethics oversight as part of the investigation reports. This is of course an important point that should be flagged for discussion. The following points are for the authors’ consideration.

1. A reason why ethics oversight was hardly mentioned would be because it was clear that the studies concerned did not have any ethics oversight, either because the boards/committees/processes were not in place, or that ethics approval were inadvertently not sought/deliberately avoided. The authors provided references to indicate that ethics approval processes and mechanisms would have been in place in a good majority of the institutions in Japan (which will concern institutions 1, 2 and 3) from a relatively early time. However, it is not clear in the writings whether institutions 1-3 had ethics boards at the time when work associated with the retracted papers were carried out. Institution 3 appears to be rather slack, but did it (and when) eventually have an ethics board in place? What about the US institution (4)? Any additional information in this connection would be useful.

2. A proper and functional Institutional Review Board (IRB) is in fact a critically important anti-fraud mechanism, as the periodic reporting and audits mandated/conducted would likely heighten researcher diligence and deter attempts at misconduct. However, it is conceivable that some ethics boards may function as nothing more than a registry, with little actual follow up activities that would constitute proper oversight. If such an inadequacy is proven to be a concern as a result of publicised retractions or misconduct investigations, what would the authors recommend?

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