



Reviewer bias or competitive harmful acts by reviewers

Case study 2

Source: Committee on Publication Ethics, [Case 05/02](#)

Reviewer/author conflict of interest

Dr B accepted an invitation to review a manuscript for Journal A. Dr B was aware only of the title of the manuscript and had read the abstract before accepting the invitation. He was also aware that he was to return his review within two weeks. When the review failed to materialise within the allotted period, the editorial office of Journal A sent the reviewer four email reminders over the course of the next month. Without ever replying to any of these reminders, Dr B submitted his own manuscript to Journal A for consideration. When the editorial office confirmed the acceptance of this manuscript, they also reminded him that they had yet to receive his review. Dr B did not respond.

When Dr B's own paper was looked at, it became clear that there was a significant degree overlap in the content of his paper and the one he was supposed to be reviewing. While the editors did not feel that Dr B had plagiarised the review manuscript, they were concerned that he had acted unethically. He had accepted an invitation to review a manuscript that was very similar to research that his own laboratory was conducting and planning to submit to the same journal. Although this scenario is not explicitly addressed in the journal's instructions to reviewers, it is Journal A's expectation that professionals in this situation will decline the invitation to review in order to avoid a conflict of interest.

Because of the obvious conflict of interest in this case, the editors cannot help but wonder whether Dr B deliberately failed to complete his promised review of the first manuscript until he had submitted his own work so as to delay the review process for the first manuscript, perhaps in an effort to advantage his own.

- Should sanctions be imposed in this case?
- What should be done with the manuscript that Dr B submitted to Journal A?

Discussion

- The reviewer's conduct does seem to be malicious and perhaps the manuscript should be given to a second reviewer.
- The reviewer should have declared his conflict of interest.
- Does the covering letter sent to reviewers ask them to declare if they are working on something similar?

Action

- Decide on whether or not to publish the first paper: it takes precedence because it was the first to arrive in the editorial office.
- Decide then whether to publish the second paper, based on the decision on the first paper (with another reviewer).
- It would be acceptable to send the first paper out to the reviewers of the second, asking how much the second paper adds.
- Check the letter sent to peer reviewers: does it make clear that reviewers should declare if they are working on a very similar piece of work
- Write to the reviewer expressing concerns about his behaviour, and ask him to give an account of himself.

Outcome

Unknown to COPE.