



Ljiljana VUČKOVIĆ-DEKIĆ

INSTITUTE FOR ONCOLOGY AND RADIOLOGY OF SERBIA,  
BELGRADE, YUGOSLAVIA

## The journal's ombudsman: are we ready for it?

**M**any researchers, reviewers and editors have experienced problems with the publishing process. These problems might happen only rarely, but when they do, they are likely to be particularly troublesome. The scientists often complain about editorial performance (e.g., tracking turn-around times for peer review, editorial decisions...), and sometimes feel that they are victims of editorial liberty-taking (1). Therefore, it seems that the violation of publication ethics is a real issue and deserves the current attention it is getting (2-4).

A highly organized administrative system runs entirely within the most reputable medical journals' editorial offices; unlike this, the editorial staff of the Archive of Oncology consists of small number of hard-working enthusiastic people. Nevertheless, these people are expected to the highest standards of scientific integrity to be adhered and maintained by all individuals engaged on publishing. They are obliged to deal, among other things, also with allegations of editorial misconduct - and many misunderstandings may result. If so, the matter should be taken seriously and any related ethical problems are expected to be solved properly - or the professional conduct would be undermined.

How these ethical issues could be dealt with? Possibly by the journal's appointment of a mediator - the journal's ombudsman. What is an Ombudsman<sup>1</sup>? It is an impartial, qualified, independent person who can advise the authors on questions of good scientific practice (5). The institution of ombudsman has been existing for several years in the USA' research institutions (6); more recently, several European countries have adopted this practice (5-9). Some of the most prominent medical journals had appointed such a person, the first being the Lancet (10). The large scientific community has welcomed the Lancet' s initiative (1).

How can the journal ombudsperson help solving ethical problems arising within the publishing process? His duty is "to record and, when necessary, to investigate episodes of alleged editorial maladministration when a complainant remains dissatisfied with the journal's first response to criticism" (10). This task must be entrusted to persons of proven honesty and integrity, who can help all actors to the publishing game to solve some ethical dilemmas facing the publishing-related problems (11-14).

Is the institution of the journal's ombudsman no more than a matter of principles only? Would an ombudsman be in real interest of

both authors and editors of the Archive of Oncology? I feel he would. He could help preventing concerns with integrity and credibility, which might be a significant step forward to improvement of the ethical climate of the publishing process (12-15). The Archive of Oncology, which has already adopted Good Scientific Practice (16,17), would pay tribute to the promotion of this important ethical codex of science by appointment of its own journal's ombudsman.

I believe that medical publishing still retains a tradition of professionalism and ethics that we must preserve. The Journal ombudsman might be of invaluable help for fulfilling our journalistic professional obligations.

<sup>1</sup>Ombudsman - an official appointed by a government to investigate individuals' complaints against public authorities etc. (Swedish = legal representative). Concise Oxford Dictionary, Ninth edition

### REFERENCES

1. Chalmers I. The Lancet's Ombudsman (Letter to the Editor). *Lancet* 1996;348:410-1.
2. Rennie D, Flanagan A. Congress on biomedical peer review. History, ethics, and plans for the future (Editorial). *JAMA* 1998;280:213.
3. Stricker RB, Goldberg B. Time for peer review reform. *Scientist* 2000;14(8):6.
4. Vučković-Dekić Lj. Time for the Journal Ombudsman? *Scientist* 2000;14(10):4.
5. Available at website: <http://dfg.de>
6. Wilcox LJ. Authorship. The coin of the realm, the source of complaints. *JAMA* 1998; 280:216-7.
7. Medical Research Council. Good Research Practice. Available on website: [www.mrc.ac.uk](http://www.mrc.ac.uk)
8. Institute for Oncology and Radiology of Serbia. Good Scientific Practice - Ethical codex of science. January 26, 2001.
9. Institute for Medical Research, Belgrade. Good Scientific Practice - Ethical codex of science. February 2001.
10. Horton R. The Lancet's ombudsman. *Lancet* 1996;348:6.
11. Horton R. The journal Ombudsperson. A step forward scientific press oversight. *JAMA* 1998;280:298-9.
12. Williams N. Editors seek ways to cope with fraud. *Science* 1997;278:1221.
13. Vučković-Dekić Lj. The way I assess a manuscript (in Serbian). *Stom Glas S* 2000; 47:127-131.
14. Sherwood T. Ombudsman's third report. *Lancet* 1999; 354:91-2.
15. Vučković-Dekić Lj. Good Scientific Practice. *Arch Oncol* 2000;8(Suppl 1):3-4.
16. Instructions to the Authors. *Arch Oncol* 2001; 9(1).
17. Vučković-Dekić Lj. Archive of Oncology makes it clear that it is strictly committed to Good Scientific Practice (Editorial). *Arch Oncol* 2001; 9:1.

Address correspondence to:

Dr Ljiljana Vučković-Dekić, Institute for Oncology and Radiology of Serbia, Pasterova 14, POB 228, 11000 Belgrade, Yugoslavia

The manuscript was received: 12.03.2001.

Accepted for publication: 17.03.2001.