



Publication: a dialogue between authors and editors

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Soon after we took over as editors of *Sexually Transmitted Infections* in 2003 we were alerted by a reader to a potential

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overlap of content between material published in *Sexually Transmitted Infections* and in *The Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care*. We investigated this and took our concerns to The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). We subsequently published a Notice of Redundant Publication,¹ together with a response from the authors concerned.² The unfolding of events is eloquently described

in the accompanying article written by the COPE Ombudsman (*see page 236*).

We urge you to read his detailed account, which has been agreed by all of those involved. It describes some of the difficulties authors and editors may encounter during the publication process—even when all parties are acting in good faith.

Competing interests: None.

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Lessons from a case of overlapping publications

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This paper describes problems that arose over the publication of a study of chlamydia screening, which was completed in 2000. The account has been agreed by the authors of the papers, the editors of the two journals involved and by the Council of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). The aim of revisiting events that occurred several years ago is to describe some of the difficulties that can arise, even when all parties act in good faith, with the hope of preventing similar problems in the future and to make readers aware of the publication history of the three papers. The UK Department of Health (DH) funded a large-scale study of opportunistic screening for chlamydia. One of the two centres involved in the study was Portsmouth. It was agreed from the outset that the Portsmouth data would be published separately, because screening methodology had differed between the two centres. The Portsmouth investigators therefore felt their presentation would be a valid separate analysis, with important messages for a

different audience from the paper describing the national findings. A paper¹ describing the national results from the study including data from Portsmouth was submitted to the *BMJ* in April 2002 together with an accompanying paper² describing the methodology. The two papers were rejected by the *BMJ* and then submitted to *Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI)* in June 2002, which accepted both papers in October 2002. Over the same period, the investigators from Portsmouth prepared their own paper,³ which they discussed with the DH, who agreed that it could be submitted but advised that it should not be published before the other papers. The paper from Portsmouth was submitted to *STI* in March 2002. However, on receiving the paper describing the national findings (in June 2002), the editor of *STI* (Dr Shahmanesh) considered that the paper from Portsmouth overlapped too much with the national results paper to be published separately in his journal and therefore asked the Portsmouth authors to withdraw their paper from *STI*, which they did in July 2002. Subsequently, the Portsmouth authors submitted their paper (unchanged) to the *Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care (JFPRHC)* together with copies of the national results

paper that was under consideration at *STI*. The editor of *JFPRHC* agreed with the Portsmouth authors that their paper, although overlapping to some extent with the other paper, was sufficiently different to warrant publication and therefore accepted it in October 2002. Unfortunately, although the authors had been open with the editor of *JFPRHC* and had supplied a copy of the related paper with their submission, because they did not know the bibliographical details of the *STI* papers they did not reference them in the *JFPRHC* paper but cited a DH website, which, at the time of publication, gave details of the study. However, the DH website cited in the *JFPRHC* paper no longer includes information about the study, so later readers could not determine the relationship between the papers.

The Portsmouth authors also kept the trial sponsor (the DH) fully informed of their publication plans, and the DH approved the publication of the Portsmouth data on the understanding that these would be published after the national findings. The contact at the DH mistakenly believed that the papers describing the national study would appear in *STI* in December 2002, and this date was not checked by the Portsmouth authors (who were authors on the other publication and therefore could have obtained this information from *STI*) or by the editor of *JFPRHC*. The paper from Portsmouth was published in *JFPRHC* in January 2003, whereas the papers describing the national findings were published in *STI* in February 2003. The papers published in *STI* made no reference to the Portsmouth paper, although all six of the Portsmouth authors were also authors

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