

future. The UK's General Medical Council is conducting a preliminary investigation into the matter and other reviews of ethics are under way.

During its annual meeting in October last year, The Council on Publication Ethics (COPE), an association of scientific editors, called for the establishment of a National Council for Research Integrity to respond to research misconduct in the UK. Whilst the operational details of the Council remain unclear — for example, whether it should be statutory or voluntary, meeting participants agreed that an independent body was urgently needed and many of them pointed to the conflict of interest generated by institutions having to investigate themselves.

In his commentary, Horton underlined the responsibility of editors in recognizing the implications for public health of publishing research. He said that he and his editorial staff had failed to recognize the potential effect the publication of the 1998 study could have on public health. "These are difficult judgements to make in hindsight. For example our sensitivity to potential conflicts of interest is very much higher today than it was in 1998," he wrote. ■

Fiona Fleck, *Geneva*

Scientific publishers divided over US trade embargo ruling

A fresh interpretation of the rules governing trade between the US and countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and Sudan has shocked American publishing houses as well as scientists and editors worldwide.

The ruling, confirmed by the US Department of the Treasury at a meeting attended by representatives from 30 publishers on 9 February 2004, says that it is illegal for scientific journals to continue peer reviewing and editing manuscripts whose authors come from Cuba, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Sudan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, or Iraq — all countries against which the US applies full trade sanctions.

The Association of American Publishers, which represents American publishers and has offices in New York and Washington, says it believes the Office of Foreign Assets Control, which issued the ruling last September, has

interpreted the law incorrectly.

The Association of American Publishers is discussing whether to challenge the ruling in the courts. Allan Adler, Vice President for Legal and Government Affairs at the association, said: "If the rulings, and more particularly the regulations, were upheld in a judicial challenge, it would be a significant blow to press freedom in the US."

Arash Etemadi, Managing Editor of the *Iranian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism*, said: "This ruling will affect the free exchange of information in the scientific world. The governments of all countries should respect free exchange of scientific information, particularly in the case of medical publications, which deal with the life and well-being of the community."

Etemadi said he knew of colleagues who had held back submitting papers for consideration by American journals because of the ruling.

The ruling has received a divided response from the American scientific publishing community. Some publishers, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which publishes the respected journal *Science*, have decided to continue considering manuscripts from the countries concerned regardless. Others, such as the journals of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), have stopped accepting such papers — a move which has infuriated its members who make up the majority of the 5100 signatures on a petition calling for the organization to "cease discrimination against IEEE members from countries that are embargoed by the US Government." In October 2003, IEEE asked the US Government to grant them a licence authorizing them to edit manuscripts from embargoed countries but it is still waiting for a reply.

"Decisions to edit and publish should not be determined by the policies of governments or other agencies outside the journal itself," said the World Association of Medical Editors, in a policy statement issued on 23 March 2004 (<http://www.wame.org/wamestmt.htm#geopolitical>). The group, which runs a global email network for its members, reported that many of its member editors were troubled by the ruling.

"Our statement will not be able to change US policy, but we think it is important to have one, to give strength

to individual editors who decide to oppose the policy," said Robert Fletcher, Chair of the Association's Editorial Policy Committee. "They will know that a large number of editors around the globe are backing them."

The ban does not apply to the publication of articles, but to the peer review and editing of articles in order to improve them for publication. A spokeswoman for the US Treasury said: "If someone writes a poem in Iran, then that can be reprinted in the US. But where there is substantial editing and collaboration with authors on an article, this is considered to be performing a service — and we cannot perform a service for a fully sanctioned country."

Speaking in early March, she said the US Treasury was reviewing this process, to establish how best to allow the free flow of information, while still maintaining full trade embargoes against the five countries.

The trade embargoes are not new. They are enshrined in the 1988 Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act. This exempts information and informational materials from the embargoes, although the exemption has been interpreted in the US as applying only to material that is "fully created" — such as camera-ready copy.

Publishers had apparently not realized that this meant they should not carry out peer review, editing or sub-editing on manuscripts from affected countries. The issue came to light only last year when IEEE asked the Office of Foreign Assets Control directly for clarification of the ruling, after the Institute's bank had queried a payment to a hotel in Tehran, the Islamic Republic of Iran, where it was co-sponsoring a conference.

The Office of Foreign Assets Control ruled in September 2003 that "the collaboration on and editing of manuscripts submitted by persons in Iran, including activities such as the reordering of paragraphs or sentences, correction of syntax, grammar, and replacement of inappropriate words by US persons, prior to publication, may result in a substantively altered or enhanced product and is therefore prohibited ... unless specifically licensed." Selection of reviewers in order to enhance or alter manuscripts was similarly prohibited. ■

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