



UK Research Integrity Office

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Dr Kamran Abbasi
Editor
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London W1G 0AE

Dear Dr Abbasi,

Mis-investigating alleged research misconduct can have dire consequences and Regulating research, regulating professionals – March 2010

The research community has long been concerned about research misconduct. It can have wide-ranging and damaging consequences. The UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) welcomes your recent articleⁱ and editorialⁱⁱ as important contributions to raising awareness of this subject.

Unfortunately, both the article and editorial contain serious errors concerning UKRIO, which we chair. The article states that:

“What seems to have been missing is ready access to the expertise needed to mount a timely and effective investigation of the *facts* that need to form the basis for any fair and effective ruling as to whether there has been research misconduct. This experience does not reside in the UK’s Panel of Research Integrity, nor is that body wholly independent.”

This is incorrect and refers to an editorial in the *Lancet*ⁱⁱⁱ which was regrettably full of errors. We wrote to the *Lancet* pointing these errors out^{iv} and it is unfortunate that this was not mentioned in your article. UKRIO is an independent body and, as the only dedicated research integrity organisation in the UK, has amassed significant expertise through its considerable experiences in helping employers, researchers and the public address research misconduct across all subject areas. No other organisation has comparable experience in providing such support to the UK research community.

Currently UKRIO receives about 30-40 formal requests for advice each year. We have provided assistance to individuals and institutions with concerns about research ranging from the health and biomedical sciences to the arts and humanities. We have found that many issues of research conduct are common to all subject areas but provide specialist expertise when necessary. Some research organisations may feel that they have issues of research integrity well in hand; however, it has become clear that many more institutions value being able to seek advice from an external source.

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We are not beholden to, nor directed by, any section of the research community. UKRIO is funded and supported by many different organisations but is not responsible to any external body other than in accounting for the funding it receives in regular reports. Additionally, UKRIO is governed by an independent Board, rather than by instructions from any of its funding bodies. None of the organisations which fund us have any role in determining which cases we may become involved with or the guidance and support that we might give and any advice and assistance given is kept confidential within UKRIO.

The editorial states that:

“A procedure for investigating alleged misconduct in research has been launched by the UK Research Integrity Office (a body that itself lacks a statutory basis), but it remains voluntary, and it is not clear how widely used it is.”

It would have been straightforward to contact UKRIO to seek clarification on the use of our published guidance and we are surprised that this was not done. The response to our *Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research*^v has been very positive. Individual research staff have commented favourably on it and universities and NHS Trusts have adopted the Procedure, in full or in part, or used it as a reference tool when revising their existing mechanisms for investigating research misconduct. Research Councils UK has recommended use of the Procedure^{vi} and we regularly receive enquiries from institutions seeking to adopt it or its sister publication, UKRIO's *Code of Practice for Research*^{vii}.

It is correct that UKRIO is not a regulatory body and has no formal legal powers. The advice and guidance it offers is not mandatory but reflects best practice in the conduct of research and addressing misconduct. From the volume of cases that we deal with, it is evident that researchers and organisations, which might be expected to be hesitant about sharing problems with a non-regulatory body, are willing to come forward and seek guidance on difficult issues. To pass on the lessons learned from our experiences, UKRIO will shortly be publishing a review of the first three years of its advisory service, including anonymised summary data and illustrative case studies.

Over the past four years UKRIO has established the service that it was intended to provide: support to researchers, research organisations and the public where there was none. Our remit extends beyond academic institutions to cover research wherever it is carried out. Parliament may in the end decide that a statutory body for regulating research is desirable but UKRIO does not seek the creation of such a body. Instead, we are increasingly providing support to researchers, universities and NHS Trusts, all of which recognise that scientific misconduct and questionable practices can tarnish the UK's well-earned reputation as a centre of excellence in research and look to UKRIO for help and advice.

We would ask you publish this letter and thereby correct the record and take any additional steps which you deem appropriate to draw readers' attention to the inaccuracies previously published in the journal.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Sir Ian Kennedy
Chair, UK Research Integrity Office



Professor Michael Farthing
Vice-Chair, UK Research Integrity Office

Competing interests: Ian Kennedy is Chair of the UK Research Integrity Office; Michael Farthing is Vice-Chair of the UK Research Integrity Office.

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This is the original draft, prior to peer-review, of a manuscript published in *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*. The definitive version, detailed above, is available online at www.rsmjournals.com.

References:

ⁱ Hey, E., and Chalmers, I. Mis-investigating alleged research misconduct can have dire consequences. *J R Soc Med* 2010; 103: 132–7

ⁱⁱ Dixon-Woods, M. Regulating research, regulating professionals [editorial]. *J R Soc Med* 2010; 103: 124–125

ⁱⁱⁱ Anon. The UK Panel of Research Integrity: a missed opportunity [editorial]. *Lancet* 2008; 372: 1438

^{iv} Kennedy, I. UK Panel for Research Integrity: more than a smokescreen. *Lancet* 2008; 372: 1877

^v UK Research Integrity Office, 2008. *Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research*.

^{vi} Research Councils UK, 2009. *RCUK Policy and Code of Conduct on the Governance of Good Research Conduct*.

^{vii} UK Research Integrity Office, 2009. *Code of Practice for Research: promoting good practice and preventing misconduct*.