

EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN

[Expressions of concern](#) are “used to raise awareness to a possible problem in an article” (Council of Science Editors, 2012). They are a relatively new, rare, and non-standardized type of editorial notice compared to corrections or retractions and “considerable differences in policy and practice remain between journals” (Vaught *et al.*, 2017).

The COPE [Retraction Guidelines](#) describe when journals could use expressions of concern. For example, editors should consider an expression of concern if:

- they receive inconclusive evidence of research or publication misconduct by the authors
- there is evidence that the findings are unreliable but the authors’ institution will not investigate the case
- they believe that an investigation into alleged misconduct related to the publication either has not been, or would not be, fair and impartial or conclusive
- an investigation is underway but a judgement will not be available for a considerable time

COPE advises that expressions of concern should be linked to the article and state the reasons for the concern. If more evidence becomes available the expression of concern could be replaced by a retraction notice or an exonerating statement, depending on the outcome.

However, journals are grappling with when expressions of concern are appropriate and what happens if the concerns are later found not to be valid. Publishing an expression of concerns prematurely when evidence is inconclusive might not be fair to the authors and some investigations are confidential. In addition, while expressions of concerns are usually about errors or potential misconduct, some notices are about the reception or interpretation of an article (for example, the note on Porter and Jick, 1980) or authorship disputes when the accuracy of the accounts of the different parties cannot be resolved.

COPE invites discussion on this topic, including the following questions:

1. What are the barriers to using them?
2. Are the situations described in the Retraction Guidelines the only ones in which an expression of concern can be used? In particular, may the reception of the article or disagreement about authorship justify an expression of concern?
3. If an expression of concern is removed because the concerns were not valid, should the original text remain available and how should the removal be indicated? Using the term “retraction” might cause confusion.
4. If the article is later retracted, should the expression of concern remain or be removed?
5. What affects the decision to publish an expression of concern when there is inconclusive evidence?
6. Should interim expressions of concern be distinguished from those intended to be final?
7. Should journals wait for an institutional investigation to become delayed or inconclusive, or could expressions of concern be published earlier?
8. When might a journal retract the article instead of publishing an expression of concern if there is evidence that findings are unreliable but no investigation will be conducted?

9. What is the best name for this type of notice? Publisher’s note and editorial note are among the alternatives.

References

Correcting the Literature, CSE’s White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications, 2012 Update <https://www.councilscienceeditors.org/resource-library/editorial-policies/white-paper-on-publication-ethics/3-5-correcting-the-literature/#351>

Vaught M, Jordan DC, Bastian H. (2017). Concern noted: a descriptive study of editorial expressions of concern in PubMed and PubMed Central. *Research Integrity and Peer Review* 2:10 DOI:10.1186/s41073-017-0030-2

Porter J, Jick H. (1980). Addiction Rare in Patients Treated with Narcotics. *New England Journal of Medicine* 302 (2): 123–123 DOI:10.1056/NEJM198001103020221

This was discussed at the start of the COPE Forum on Monday 26 February 2018.

COMMENTS FROM THE FORUM (Monday 26 February 2018) – NOTE, Comments do not imply formal COPE advice, or consensus.

- The term “Expression of concern” has negative connotations, in particular because it is often associated with retraction, and can be perceived as “retraction light”. Do we need to invent something entirely new here, something separate from retraction?
- “Expression of concern” implies a value judgement. Should we consider other terms, such as “editorial note” or “publisher’s note”?
- Sometimes there are serious concerns, and so the term “Expression of concern” is entirely appropriate, to alert future readers and researchers to possible issues with a paper.
- Perhaps we need additional distinct categories, for different types of concerns; for example, different levels of post-publication notices, providing a multi-layered approach to this problem.
- Editors find Expressions of Concern confusing, so although a multi-layered approach may be needed, this may cause even more confusion.
- Clearly defining the Expression of Concern when it is published might help in the long run. We also need clear definitions of all post-publication notices—when some of these are documented in Medline, they may be labelled errata with the exception of retractions. Labels of Expression of Concern and removal of Expression of Concern may be confusing. Do we need to work with a larger group of people to make sure that these definitions and labels are very clear?
- Regarding a multi-layered approach, the severity of the case is one aspect but is there scope for something that is not permanent? There are the considerations of the authors on the one hand, regarding an Expression of Concern linked to their paper, even after they have been exonerated or the Expression of Concern has been lifted, and on the other hand the need for a complete record of the history of the paper.
- If an editor does not have enough evidence to retract an article but does want to alert the reader to possible issues with a paper, then an Expression of Concern can be published. But without sufficient evidence, it is often difficult to provide useful details, without

defaming the author, so the Expression of Concern then has to be very general, which may not be very useful.

- Timings—when does the journal start the process of issuing an Expression of Concern?
- Editors need guidance on the decision making process in publishing an Expression of Concern, in relation to when to contact the authors' institutions. When should the institution be involved? What should drive or influence the editor's decision to contact the institution when dealing with cases of Expressions of Concern?
- It is clear that the editor needs to contact the institution if he/she needs more evidence to make a decision (for example, in authorship disputes or if there is any misconduct) but what is the editor's duty to the institution?
- Should the editor consider notifying the author's institution, as a courtesy, before publishing an Expression of Concern? Should the institution be notified prior to publication of a retraction or an Expression of Concern? Where in the process should the journal contact the institution?
- Journals should consider contacting institutions more often than they currently do. One reason is that institutions may never become aware of the Expression of Concern and hence the Expression of Concern may never come to the attention of the authorities. This is particularly important in cases where the authors are serial offenders. This needs to be brought to the attention of the institution.
- Institutions are often left out of the discussion if journals fail to make them aware of the situation. Institutions then do not even have the opportunity to investigate, follow-up or address the issue inhouse. This is particularly problematic with serial offenders but also in cases of co-authors who are acting as supervisors or mentors. In these instances, it is important to address and correct their behaviours so that these types of practices are not taught. Mentoring and setting examples are important.
- Deans of universities have a fiduciary responsibility to the public to maintain ethical standards in teaching, research and service, and would want to know if a concern rose to the level of retracting an article. But there is little training in this area. Institutions have a responsibility to investigate issues that have been raised to the level of a retraction but in the area of Expressions of Concern, it is a little more grey. There is diversity in the types of concerns covered by Expression of Concern. Could there be a role for COPE in producing guidelines for administrators at institutions?
- What if the authors are not affiliated to a university, but belong to private institutions or private practices that do not have audit systems in place? Who do you contact? In the biomedical field, the institutional review board who approved the research initially could be contacted, but what about surveys or other research that might not need institutional approval.
- Editors often have concerns about libel/defamation issues when contacting institutions regarding potential misconduct by authors. Hence these can be barriers to journal editors issuing Expressions of Concern due to legal concerns from authors, and so the journal may often issue a general Expression of Concern.
- When contacting institutions, editors should do so in a neutral, non-accusatory way, and clearly state the facts.
- It is a good idea to give the authors the chance to state whether or not they agree with the Expression of Concern, which would mitigate the risk of defamation and would also be good in terms of transparency.

- An Expression of Concern could be considered (at least online) both as a status (ie, metadata) and as a published note. The status can change if the concern is resolved one way or another. The note can be permanent part of the record. Are there examples of this kind of approach?

ACTIONS: COPE is in the process of revising the COPE “Guidelines for retracting articles” https://publicationethics.org/files/retraction%20guidelines_0.pdf. COPE will give this issue serious consideration and do more research before determining if separate documents are needed on Retractions and Expressions of Concern.

COMMENTS POSTED ON THE WEBSITE

Posted by Charon Pierson, 22/2/2018

I believe the term expression of concern is a poor choice for conveying what this type of notice could or should cover. Concern implies something is wrong, yet often the problem is merely a question that has yet to be resolved. I think editors wait a long time to use this mechanism because they are not certain of the concern, but rather they are awaiting further information. So rather than post an EoC, they will wait for the outcome of any investigations, further data analysis, or resolution of authorship or reviewer disputes. If we could post an editor's note, we could alert readers to the issue early and resolve the note as quickly with another editor's note stating the outcome. The fact that the EoC information currently resides within the retraction guidelines is another deterrent. It is perceived as a "mini-retraction".

Posted by Nancy Chescheir, 23/2/2018

1. What are the barriers to using them?

I agree with Charon's notes above regarding barriers--may seem premature; can be construed as a sledge hammer approach to small problem given potential for stigma; lack of clarity around lifting the EoC.

2. Are the situations described in the Retraction Guidelines the only ones in which an expression of concern can be used? In particular, may the reception of the article or disagreement about authorship justify an expression of concern?

I think authorship issues would be a good use for these, particularly when someone requests a change in authorship after publication. There are red flags with that which may not justify anything more than clarification.

3. If an expression of concern is removed because the concerns were not valid, should the original text remain available and how should the removal be indicated? Using the term “retraction” might cause confusion.

I would recommend that instead of retraction that "lifting" may be a better choice. The original text should be removed if the concerns are invalid.

4. If the article is later retracted, should the expression of concern remain or be removed?

I think it should be removed and let the higher level statement remain. No reason to have 2 statements.

5. What affects the decision to publish an expression of concern when there is inconclusive evidence?

The severity of the concern would be one thing. If it's a major issue, I would want to flag it. In addition, as noted above, if the institutional response seems like it's going to take a very long time.

6. Should interim expressions of concern be distinguished from those intended to be final?

Not sure I have an opinion. I think this question raises a point of confusion for me. In my mind, the EoC mechanism is primarily interim. I would think the issue would either be resolved (and the EoC removed) or affirmed and then a stronger statement replaces it.

7. Should journals wait for an institutional investigation to become delayed or inconclusive, or could expressions of concern be published earlier?

See above.

8. When might a journal retract the article instead of publishing an expression of concern if there is evidence that findings are unreliable but no investigation will be conducted?

If no investigation to be conducted over a problem, then I would retract it. The author should advocate for clearance of her or his article by whatever institution would do that.

9. What is the best name for this type of notice? Publisher's note and editorial note are among the alternatives.

A publisher's note and editorial note seem to me would be two different things given they would come from 2 different bodies. I think using the word "alert" may be better than Expression of Concern. Maybe something like "editorial (or publisher) alert". That doesn't imply concern, which as Charon notes, which implies that something is wrong.

Posted by Vivienne Bachelet, 26/2/2018

Up to now we have been talking about going back to the "institution", being this a university. What if the author/s of an article with an expression of concern belong to other types of organizations? Like hospitals, or private consultant firms, etc.