

# Liaison between universities and journals about research and publication misconduct

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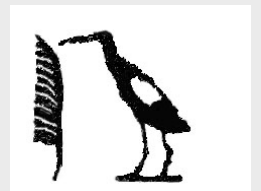
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# Journals and institutions have different roles and responsibilities

Responsibility to readers  
(not to mislead)

## Journals



May be first to suspect  
misconduct

Are not set up to investigate  
misconduct

Desire to protect reputation

## Institutions

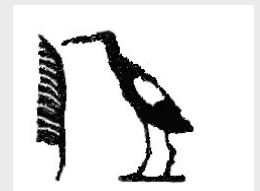


Responsibility to staff  
(employment rights)

Need to be informed about  
suspected misconduct

Should investigate  
misconduct

Desire to protect reputation



# Their roles & responsibilities may affect their relationship (+/-)



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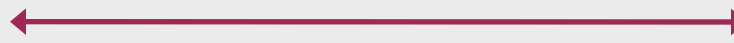
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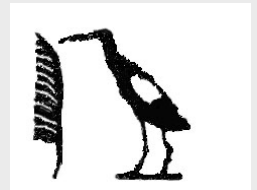
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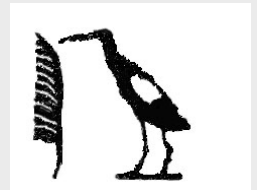
## Journals and institutions may also need to share information amongst themselves

- Misconduct is often only apparent from several articles (not single ones)
- Manuscripts rejected on ethical grounds may be resubmitted to other journals (?after covering-up problem)
- Researchers sacked from one institution may apply for posts at others



# Jatinder Ahluwalia

- Postdoc, University College, London with Prof Anthony Segal
- Colleagues couldn't replicate his work
- Investigation 2009-10 found falsification:
  - Entering lab at night, altering computer files, contaminating chemicals in colleagues' experiments
- *Nature* article retracted but *Nature* refused to publish panel's findings as supplementary materials (fear of litigation)
- Imperial College reviewed JA's PhD but found only minor errors (but false claims on his CV)
- Further investigation (2010) – *J Neurochem* paper retracted
- JA got lectureship at Univ East London
- Then JA's supervisor revealed JA was dismissed from University of Cambridge doctoral programme in 1998 for suspected misconduct
- 2011 JA left UEL



Secrets and lies: the timeline of a misconduct case

**1996:** Jatinder Ahluwalia begins PhD at the [University of Cambridge](#)

**1998:** Ahluwalia dismissed from Cambridge for suspected research misconduct

**1999:** Ahluwalia begins a PhD at [Imperial College London](#)

**2002:** Ahluwalia obtains doctorate from Imperial

**2002:** Tony Segal, Charles Dent professor of medicine at [University College London](#), recruits Ahluwalia as a postdoc

**2003:** A paper is published in the *Journal of Neurochemistry* reporting results Ahluwalia obtained during his PhD

**2004:** Segal and Ahluwalia publish a paper in *Nature* setting out the latter's 'findings' on the potassium channel in Segal's lab

**2006:** Segal sets to work on repeating Ahluwalia's potassium-channel experiments after a paper is published in the *Journal of General Physiology* contradicting his findings

**2007:** Ahluwalia leaves Segal's lab

**2008:** Segal writes to Imperial to explain that UCL is about to begin a formal investigation into Ahluwalia's research at UCL. He also reports strong suspicions about Ahluwalia's 2003 paper

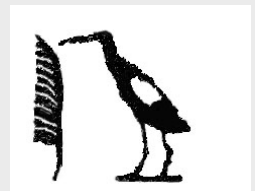
**November 2010:** UCL publishes the results of its formal investigation. The *Nature* paper is retracted

**February 2011:** Ahluwalia's 1998 dismissal from Cambridge reported by Retraction Watch

**July 2011:** UEL announces that it has parted company with Ahluwalia following an internal investigation

**August 2011:** The 2003 *Journal of Neurochemistry* paper is retracted. Imperial announces it is considering revoking Ahluwalia's PhD.

*Times Higher Education,*  
Paul Jump, Aug 23, 2012

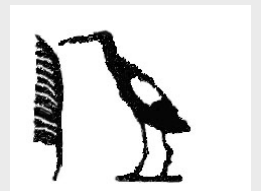


# Problems with journals, funders and institutions

- Imperial College was slow to investigate PhD work – delay partly due to raw data being held by Novartis
- UEL did not give reason for “parting company” with JA
- *Nature* published unhelpful retraction

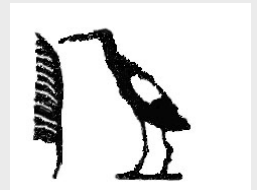
“

The authors wish to retract this Letter after the report of an inability to reproduce their results<sup>1</sup>, later confirmed by another<sup>2</sup>. The studies the authors then conducted led to an internal investigation by University College London, please see the accompanying [Supplementary Information](#) for details. The retraction has not been signed by [Jatinder Ahluwalia](#).



# Anil Potti

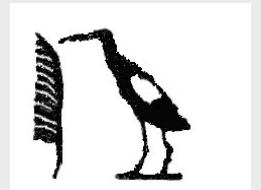
- Cancer researcher, Duke University, USA
- 2006 published findings on chemotherapy selection
- 2009 clinical trial started
- Statisticians at MD Anderson Center raise concerns – ignored by journals and university
- Published concerns Sept 2009
- Duke suspended trial, investigated Potti but found no problem (did not supply statistical concerns to panel) and restarted trial in Jan 2010
- Duke refused to share report with statisticians (got it under FoI)
- July 2010 Potti shown to have falsified his CV – suspended
- Trial stopped (109 patients had been enrolled)
- >10 articles retracted
- Aug 2015: ORI finds Potti guilty of misconduct





# Problems with journals and institutions

- Journal ignored statisticians' concerns
- Duke University performed an inadequate investigation



## Problems with journals:

Do editors always retract unreliable papers?

### Poehlman case

- March 2005: ORI announced that 10 articles contain fabricated data
- November 2005: only 5/10 articles had been retracted
- Rennie & Sox Ann Int Med 2006;144:609-13

*“Editors who fail to retract undo the hard work of investigating panels and negate the courage of the whistleblower”*



# Update on Poehlman case

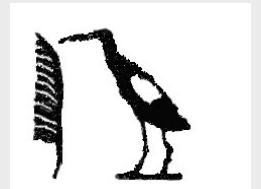
Of the 10 papers identified as fraudulent by ORI

- 1 is not on Medline, can't trace journal
- 6/9 have been retracted
- 1 has no comment in the journal  
(*Coronary Artery Disease*)
- 1 has an erratum (*Am J Physiol*)
- 1 has a comment (*Obesity Res*)  
(=letter from Poehlman received March 05,  
published July 05)



# Example of good cooperation

- *Nature* 19 Sept 2012: 489: 346-7
- “Retraction record rocks community”
- Yoshitaka Fujii
- Investigated / Dismissed by Toho University
- 23 journal editors wrote to 6 universities
- *“Five of those institutions have responded to say that they could not find evidence to corroborate the veracity of 88 papers. The sixth institution, the University of Tsukuba, has so far found only five papers to be valid. It is still investigating another 92 publications.”*





## Cooperation between research institutions and journals on research integrity cases: guidance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)

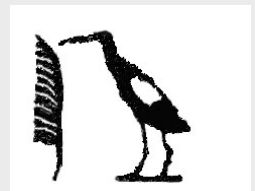
### *Summary*

Institutions and journals both have important duties relating to research and publication misconduct. Institutions are responsible for the conduct of their researchers and for encouraging a healthy research environment. Journals are responsible for the conduct of their editors, for safeguarding the research record, and for ensuring the reliability of everything they publish. It is therefore important for institutions and journals to communicate and collaborate effectively on cases relating to research integrity. To achieve this, we make the following recommendations.

Institutions should:

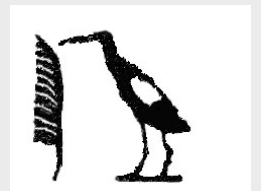
- have a research integrity officer (or office) and publish their contact details prominently;
- inform journals about cases of proven misconduct that affect the reliability or attribution of work that they have published;

[http://publicationethics.org/files/Research\\_institutions\\_guidelines\\_final\\_0\\_0.pdf](http://publicationethics.org/files/Research_institutions_guidelines_final_0_0.pdf)



# Underlying principles

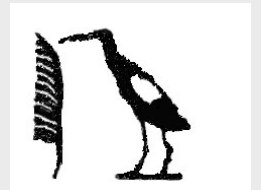
- Institutions are responsible for the conduct of their researchers / employees
- Journal editors are responsible for ensuring the reliability of what they publish





# Institutions should:

- Have a RI office(r) and publish contact details
- Inform journals about cases of proven misconduct
- Respond to journals' queries
- Investigate allegations of misconduct
- Have policies supporting RCR



# In UK

- Only 37% of universities had named member of staff with contact details for research integrity enquiries

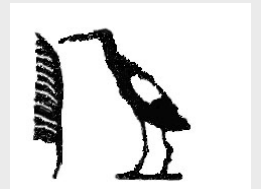




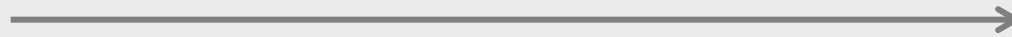
# Journals should:

- Publish contact details of Editor  
(act as point of contact)
- Inform institutions if they suspect misconduct
- Cooperate with institutions / investigations
- Issue retractions / corrections as required\*
- Have policies for responding to institutions and other RI organizations

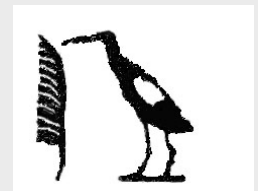
\* follow COPE retraction guidelines



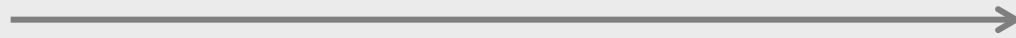
# Why don't journals inform institutions?



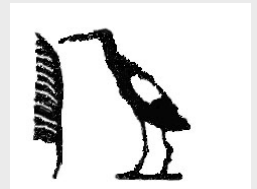
- Fear of disproportionate response
- Concern of unfair investigation
- Don't know who to contact
- Previous bad experience (no response)
  - Lack of time (an “onerous duty”)
- Concern about litigation



# Why don't institutions inform journals?



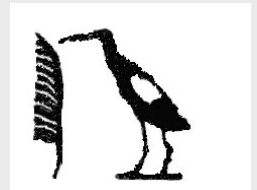
- Concern about confidentiality of disciplinary proceedings (after investigation)
- Concern about litigation
- Reputational risk  
Previous bad experience (no response)
- Concern about “trial by media”  
(during inquiry)



# How much evidence should journals collect before contacting an institution?

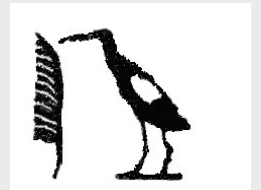


- Want ‘reasonable grounds’
- What to do when reviewer say “this is too good to be true” but no specific evidence?
- Don’t want to waste institution’s time
- Not set up to investigate
- Risk of alerting researchers (leading to destruction of evidence)



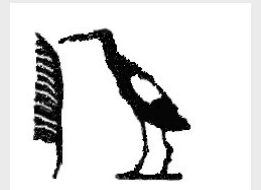
# How to handle

- Allegations from anonymous whistleblowers?
- Concerns raised on social media (eg PubPeer)?
- Allegations about research from many years ago?



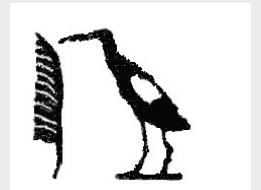
## What should journals do when they detect possible misconduct from screening?

- Many journals use text-matching screening
- May provide clear evidence of plagiarism or redundant publication
- Some journals screen digital images
- May provide clear evidence of image manipulation (data falsification)



# In an ideal world

- Journals should inform research institution / employer (?funder)
- Institution should investigate
- But what if they won't investigate / don't reply?

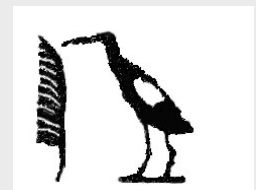


# Examples of problems



*BMJ* 2011;343:d6586

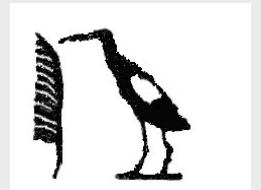
Analysis of 24 COPE cases 2007-11	No of cases
Appropriate response	12
No response	4
Unhelpful response	4
No institution to contact	3
Outcome unknown	1





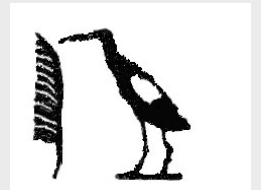
# Expressions of concern

- Used when:
  - On-going / lengthy investigation
  - No response from institution
  - Journal has concerns about fairness of investigation
  
- Useful to alert readers
  
- But could they damage reputation if researcher is later cleared?



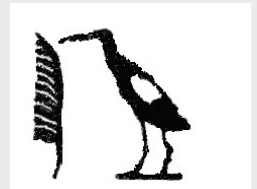
# Should journals always contact authors first?

- COPE guidelines / flowcharts always suggest authors are asked for explanation
- Could this alert researchers to concern and allow them to destroy evidence before an institutional investigation?



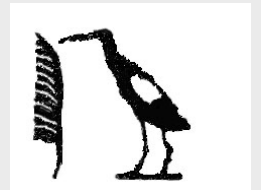
## Do institutions have a duty to reveal outcomes / reports of investigations?

- Journal needs information to publish informative retraction notice
- Very important to distinguish honest error from misconduct
- But institutions have duty to respect employee confidentiality
- May fear litigation
- May want to protect reputation



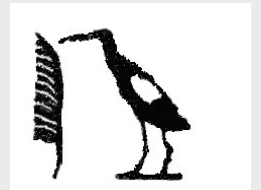
# Should journals always trust institutional investigations?

- Editor contacted institution about complex case, responded 2 days later “everything OK”
- Duke – failed to investigate Potti case properly
- Imperial College – slow to investigate Ahluwalia
- Researchers may challenge findings



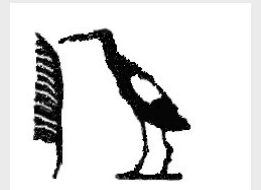
# Can institutions share information with journals?

- Different legislations
- Employee protection
- Concern about litigation
- When can information be shared?



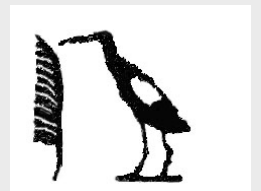
# Another difficulty

- Journals have a responsibility to correct the research record (for problems of any cause, including honest errors)
- Institutions have a responsibility to determine whether misconduct has occurred
- Even if an investigation concludes there was no misconduct, findings may be unreliable and need correction or retraction
- What is role of institutions (vs researchers) in correcting the literature?



# What next?

- Develop CLUE guidelines – discuss at WCRI, Amsterdam, May 2017
- Developments in data sharing / posting / curation may help investigations
- Media attention / public awareness (eg Retraction Watch) (does this help?)
- Journals and institutions need to understand and discuss their roles and how they can cooperate



*“Be careful about reading health books.  
You may die of a misprint.”*

*“Always do right. This will gratify some  
people and astonish the rest.”*

Mark Twain

