EDITORIAL

Professionalism and authorship: Taking responsibility for sharing nursing science

It is gratifying that the nursing profession is placing more emphasis on formal dissemination of nursing science through scholarly publication. JAANP has been publishing consistently for 29 years; for the last 22 years, we have published 12 issues per year. I have written several times about the importance of peer review, most recently recognizing the importance of peer review (Pierson, 2015a) and publishing a guide to peer review (Pierson, 2015b). I have not written about authorship. Often, I write about issues that arise during my work as a journal editor and as a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). A problem with authorship and professional behavior at JAANP recently occurred and is on my mind as I write this editorial.

The work of publication in brief

Monthly publication of a scholarly journal is a lot of work, and it’s not just the editor who is working to assure that the highest quality articles are published. Authors spend a considerable amount of time researching and preparing articles; reviewers, at least two per manuscript, spend time and effort providing substantive feedback to authors to improve the content and presentation of submitted manuscripts. Frequently, more than one cycle of review occurs for a manuscript, so that reviewer time is doubled. Among the many tasks of the editor are reading submissions, reviews, and revisions; deciding on the suitability of the manuscript for publication; approving and editing manuscripts for publication; preparing manuscript files for entry into the production system on acceptance of the manuscript; reviewing all the proofs for final manuscripts; deciding on the running order of a particular issue; and finally, reviewing the entire issue again prior to publication. During the publication process, typesetters, copy editors, production editors, and programmers are involved in manuscript processing, spending varying amounts of time on each manuscript to assure the final article is correct, references are complete and linked, a DOI is assigned, and the style conforms to journal standards.

Peer review has been called the cornerstone of scholarly publishing. Reviewers volunteer to act as peer reviewers out of a sense of professional responsibility and to honor the work of other peer reviewers who have aided the volunteers’ own work as authors in the past. Agreeing to act as a peer reviewer implies a contract to fulfill specific obligations, including, maintaining confidentiality, acting ethically in all aspects of reviewing, completing the review in a timely and scholarly manner (Hames on behalf of COPE Council, 2013). Peer review has been widely studied and publicized, and an underlying theme in much of the literature is the professional responsibilities of peer reviewers. Resources related to authorship are not as easily found and largely focus on determining who is an author and recognizing unethical practices such as gift and ghost authorship (see for example the ICMJE guidelines: http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html). So, I was puzzled when I recently encountered an author of an accepted manuscript in JAANP who asked to withdraw her manuscript in the proofing stage because she did not have time to do the proof corrections. I could not find any discussion of how to handle this situation, therefore, I wrote this in the hope that it will help others better understand the scope of the professional responsibilities inherent in authorship.

What could an editor do to resolve this situation?

I asked our editorial board to review the situation and received good feedback, including offers of assistance to the author. I contacted the author to discuss the situation and offered the help of a member of the editorial board to mentor her through the process. I did learn that the paper was submitted by a student author during her graduate program and that she had graduated and taken a new and demanding job. I reviewed with the author my thoughts about the situation, trying to emphasize how much work by many individuals had gone into getting her manuscript to the proofing stage. I emphasized that the corrections needed were quite mundane and simple, certainly not unusual in number or complexity, and could be easily addressed with the help of a mentor. I suggested the author could contact a faculty member at her university to ask for assistance; if submission of a manuscript was a requirement for course completion or graduation, the faculty involved would be an appropriate resource even though the student had already graduated. I emphasized the value of having a publication in a respected journal on one’s resume. Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful and the student has declined to make any corrections. I am forced to withdraw the manuscript.
How does this situation reflect on professionalism?

In my opinion, there are at least two issues here that need further examination. First is the apparent lack of follow through on the part of faculty teaching in academic programs. A requirement of manuscript submission to pass a course or to graduate carries with it very specific obligations on the part of faculty. Students must understand and agree to follow through on their professional obligation to complete the publication process when a manuscript has been accepted even if that means working on revisions, corrections, or proofs after graduation. A successful manuscript is somewhat of a rarity given that manuscript rejection rates are often well above 75% in respected scholarly journals. Success in publishing is something to be celebrated and to be proud of, thereby worth the sacrifice in time and energy to see the process through to publication. It was precisely this lack of follow through that was the impetus for a group of nurse editors who organized a workgroup to study issues with student papers (Kennedy, Newland, & Owens, 2016) and provide guidance to faculty (Cowell & Pierson, 2016) on how to promote successful writing and publishing experiences in graduate nursing education. A key element in the findings from the nurse editors’ project was that students did not understand the larger picture of scholarly publication and treated the assignment as akin to submitting a paper to faculty for a grade. Once the grade was given, or the requirement for submission fulfilled, it seemed the task was complete and the student was under no further obligation to finish the job. Second, I think it demonstrates a lack of respect for the profession when students disregard the work done by others to help them be successful in publishing. Many faculty members work hard to help their students write and publish, so it is disheartening when students do not follow through with opportunities to publish. Usually the lack of follow through occurs prior to production; this was definitely an unusual case. Nurse practitioners (NPs) are respectful and professional as they work collaboratively in

many settings and writing and publishing should be no exception.

Professionalism embodies many attributes and accountability is one important piece. NPs are expected to be accountable to their patients, their employers, to society, and to their profession. Being accountable for clinical care, for what one writes, whether in an article or in a peer review, or what one teaches or demands of students, are critical elements of professional behavior. Respect for others is also an essential attribute. Students deserve a good education and part of that education is learning about professional responsibility, excellence, duty, and accountability in all aspects of the NP role. If we believe that dissemination of nursing science is essential for students to appreciate and to our progress as a profession, and if it is critical to our personal professional development, then we must demand professional behavior in all aspects of writing, reviewing, editing, and publishing. This requires we all respect the efforts of those who help and support scholarly publishing. This is the standard for every other profession. It should be the standard for NPs and NP education as well.

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References


