

Ombudsman’s report for 2015

I became Ombudsman to the *Lancet* journals at the start of 2015, taking over the post from Wisia Wedzicha, who, having been appointed editor of the *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine*, had stepped down at the end of the previous year. To my knowledge I am the first holder of this post not resident in the UK—I was based in Malawi during most of 2015, but relocated to the UK in December.

I was, however, able to visit the *Lancet* offices in London on several occasions during the year, when I participated in some of the weekly discussions of the editorial team about issues that can arise after publication, or during consideration, of the various different types of article in the ten journals for which I am responsible. Most of these potential cases are resolved satisfactorily before reaching me, often by the judicious application of guidelines suggested by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and appropriate institutional investigations, and in some cases thanks to amendments to the journal’s procedures that have been instigated by previous Ombudsmen.

Several cases that arose in 2015 deserve comment. A complaint made early in the year concerned an item of Correspondence that had been published in *The Lancet* in the previous year. The published letter had included a declaration that there were no relevant competing interests, and this had subsequently been amended with a Department of Error. The complainant argued that the correction exaggerated the extent of the author’s involvement in a relevant European working group, and that it also neglected to mention other possible competing interests. After careful inspection of the documentation, my judgment was that the amended competing interest declaration was appropriate. As a result of this case I recommended to the editors that competing interest declarations supported by International Committee of Medical Journal Editors forms should be collected for items of Correspondence, as they are for other types of publication in *Lancet* journals, a policy which is now in place. The same complainant also raised several issues about the content of the Correspondence in question, and about the scientific robustness of one of the documents cited in it. I judged that too much time (many months) had now passed;

these issues would have been appropriate to raise within a week or two of the appearance of the original publication.

A surprising complaint received later in the year proposed that a research study that was published in *The Lancet* in 1998¹ and then fully retracted in February, 2010, should be reinstated to the literature. My adjudication was that the argument for reinstatement of the paper, based on a case in the UK’s High Court brought by one of the paper’s authors, was not directly prejudicial to the strong case for the paper’s retraction.

a suggestion that someone other than myself deal with a case involving an alleged error by myself, the editor and others, and two letters about The Lancet’s repeated failures to mention world leaders’ pledges in the Millennium Declaration on saving lives of children and mothers, and the Lancet’s repeated understatement of those pledges by wrongly claiming and implying they were to be achieved in 25 years instead of 15.
~~I received a complaint about the editor’s decision not to accept for publication a letter about various mentions in The Lancet of the baseline date for measurement of improvements in women’s and children’s health set out in the Millennium Declaration. Similar complaints had been made to several newspapers and published on websites. My task was not to decide which baseline dates were relevant to the Millennium Declaration, the Millennium Development Goals, or the assessments of what has been achieved over the past 15 and 25 years. I had to determine whether there was a compelling case for the Ombudsman to over rule the editorial decision. I considered there was not.~~

~~My role is independent and, aside from publication of this Comment, I receive no material reward for serving as Ombudsman to the *Lancet* journals. The cases that have arisen in 2015 have been diverse and interesting. I am glad to have made a small contribution to journal processes. The most difficult part of the Ombudsman’s role is to resist the temptation to engage in debate with complainants over each point raised, a process that could become impossibly protracted. I have tried to understand each case thoroughly,~~ but to adjudicate with brevity.

Expansion of the *Lancet* family of journals and migration of published material online seem likely to lead to further challenges in the future.

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I declare no competing interests.

Misleading.
 It was in fact alleged that the ombudsman himself had made the error understating the Millennium pledges.

1 Wakefield AJ, Murch SH, Anthony A, et al. Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children. *Lancet* 1998; **351**: 637-41.