

The ethics in research involving humans reflected in journals' editorial guidelines: a constant reflection

Ética na pesquisa com seres humanos refletida nas diretrizes editoriais de periódicos: uma reflexão constante

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Dear Editor,

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Recently, the Medical Journal of Minas Gerais published the article entitled “Ethics of editors of Brazilian journals: progress and challenges”.¹ That work, when proposing to update the study by Sardenberg et al.², revealed an advancement in the ethical conduct of the analyzed Brazilian scientific journals.

These data certainly may suggest the evolution of posture and bioethical thinking of researchers concerning the fulfilment of ethical assumptions in research involving humans and the importance of editorial guidelines of medical journals to remain in line with the ethical assumptions established in the current Resolution CNS 466/2013.

The data obtained by Sardenberg et al.² should be analyzed considering the early years of a new legislation (at the time, resolution CNS 196/1996 was in place for only three years) are characterized by a period of transition that is understood as a step of assimilation and acceptance of the new guidelines. That would justify the lack of any reference to ethical questions in the Instructions to Authors of more than 79% of the analyzed journals. On the other hand, the joint efforts of research institutions regarding the requirements for approval of studies by ethics research committees (CEP), and of researchers who have shown more assimilation and understanding of the importance to comply with ethical aspects, may have resulted from the increase in the number of journals complying with Resolution CNS 466/2013 as noted by Magalhães et al.¹

Conversely, the improvement of ethical approaches in the Instructions to Authors verified by Magalhães et al.¹ should be examined with caution. Some of our studies, for example, revealed that the number of journals that make little or no requirements in the fulfilment of ethical aspects in research with human beings for the publication of studies still remains significant.³⁻⁶ Thus, there is a need for more balance between conscious ethics in institutions that develop their research attached to the Conep/MS system and national medical journals that convey their publications. Even if they are not supervisory bodies, the journals could cooperate even more by publishing only studies that meet ethical standards. Therefore, we suggest the attention of journals to aspects such as the instruction on the importance of accreditation of the CEP that approved the study in the Conep-CEP system, and the requirement of sending a copy of the approval protocol issued by the CEP. Rowan-Legg et al.⁷ claim that adherence to ethical standards in editorial policies of journals that publish research with hu-

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man beings is important for the scientific community to follow such assumptions with more rigor.

Another interesting question linked to the theme of the study by Magalhães et al.¹ was brilliantly raised in the work of Teixeira et al.⁸ How much of the requirements for compliance with ethical aspects are related to the quality of a journal? In this study, the authors found that the impact factor is a determining factor in the ethics contained in the Instructions to Authors of scientific journals, showing that the best quality journals seek articles with better designs and criteria from the research start. However, as pointed out by Teixeira et al.⁸, *“the big question is: the journals that require greater amount of ethical issues do so because they have high impact factor or, on the contrary, they have high impact factor because they respect ethical criteria?”*

Of course we do not aim here to go down to detailed and branched discussions that this question demands, however, it is a fact that quality journals that stimulate compliance with the ethical aspects involved in research with human beings show a very interesting ripple effect in which readers, journals, and research participants benefit.

Hence, I congratulate the Medical Journal of Minas Gerais for publishing quality articles (such as Magalhães et al.¹) that discuss relevant issues in science (often neglected in various journals). The current data about the ethical approach in national and international journals is a powerful invitation to intensify and enrich debates, discussions, and analysis of the regulation of ethics in research in all training spaces that can even lead to the articulation of joint cross-disciplinary research between teaching institutions, researchers, and scientific journals expanding circles of reciprocity and ethical reflection.

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