Enhancing Partnerships of Institutions and Journals to Address Concerns About Research Misconduct

Recommendations From a Working Group of Institutional Research Integrity Officers and Journal Editors and Publishers

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Abstract

IMPORTANCE Institutions and journals strive to promote and protect the integrity of the research record, and both groups are equally committed to ensuring the reliability of all published data.

OBSERVATIONS Three US universities coordinated a series of virtual meetings from June 2021 to March 2022 for a working group composed of senior, experienced US research integrity officers (RIOs), journal editors, and publishing staff who are familiar with managing issues of research integrity and publication ethics. The goal of the working group was to improve the collaboration and transparency between institutions and journals to ensure that research misconduct and publication ethics are managed properly and efficiently. Recommendations address the following: identifying proper contacts at institutions and journals, specifying information to share between institutions and journals, correcting the research record, reconsideration of some fundamental research misconduct concepts, and journal policy changes. The working group identified 3 key recommendations to be adopted and implemented to change the status quo for better collaboration between institutions and journals: (1) reconsideration and broadening of the interpretation by institutions of the need-to-know criteria in federal regulations (ie, confidential or sensitive information and data are not disclosed unless there is a need for an individual to know the facts to perform specific jobs or functions), (2) uncoupling the evaluation of the accuracy and validity of research data from the determination of culpability and intent of the individuals involved, and (3) initiating a widespread change for the policies of journals and publishers regarding the timing and appropriateness for contacting institutions, either before or concurrently under certain conditions, when contacting the authors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RELEVANCE The working group recommends specific changes to the status quo to enable effective communication between institutions and journals. Using confidentiality clauses and agreements to impede sharing does not benefit the scientific community nor the integrity of the research record. However, a careful and informed framework for improving communications and sharing information between institutions and journals can foster better working relationships, trust, transparency, and most importantly, faster resolution to data integrity issues, especially in published literature.


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Introduction

Institutions and journals strive to promote and protect the integrity of the research record, and both groups are equally committed to ensuring the reliability of all published data. When allegations of falsification, fabrication, or plagiarism (FFP) are raised, incorrect data, images, or text may already be included in published literature or in manuscripts submitted for publication. Federal regulations in the US limit the definition of research misconduct to FFP. While some US institutions within or outside of the US have a broader definition, we will use the federal definition when we reference research misconduct. The task of correcting the research record often falls to the authors of the publications, along with their university's or research institution's research integrity officer (RIO) or other responsible officials (collectively termed RIOs). However, research misconduct proceedings include strict provisions for confidentiality, raising questions about when to contact journals and what information should be shared. Editors and publishing staff (collectively termed journals) may get complaints raised directly to them, or journals may identify complaints during the publication review process. Since journals have their own confidentiality policies, questions arise about whether, or when, journals should contact institutional RIOs and what are the consequences of such interactions.

We collectively support the principles guiding the recommendations herein and approve of and support their release. Participation in the group does not indicate that each of its members agree with every detail and does not indicate endorsement from the organizations with which the members are employed or otherwise affiliated.

Methods

Three US universities, The Ohio State University, Northwestern University, and George Washington University, coordinated a series of virtual meetings from June 2021 to March 2022 for a group of senior, experienced US RIOs, journal editors, and publishing staff familiar with managing issues of research integrity and publication ethics (hereafter, the working group), to identify areas for improving collaboration and transparency between institutions and journals to ensure that research misconduct and publication ethics are managed properly and efficiently. The working group met in 12 virtual sessions and discussed the current status quo for institution and journal practices and interactions in handling complex allegations (ie, FFP), sharing information, and correcting the research record. We recognized early in the discussions that RIOs handle many adherence and integrity issues, in addition to research misconduct, and that journals routinely manage complicated issues related to unreliable or untrustworthy data, which can often be resolved without contacting RIOs or initiating institutional proceedings. However, we focused our discussions on ways to improve interactions between RIOs and journals in the context of US research misconduct processes. Our recommendations complement guidance previously described in the Cooperation & Liaison between Universities & Editors (CLUE) guidelines and are based on those of other resources and organizations, and the collective experience of working group members. An in-depth description of the working group recommendations are available elsewhere.

Observations and Recommendations

Although institutions and journals managing integrity matters are working toward the same goal to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the research record, they have slightly different objectives and interests. Specifically, institutions must consider whether data are accurate and who is responsible for the inaccuracies, while journals focus on the accuracy of the data rather than the culpability of individuals. In addition, whom to contact (ie, authors or institutions), and when to initiate contact between institutions and journals are complicated questions and are often case specific. Our discussions led the working group to introduce a call-to-action for both institutions and journals to...
consider and implement some recommendations. We provide a summary of our discussions and recommendations in Box 1.

Proper Contacts at Institutions and Journals
The working group discussed how finding the correct person to contact for research integrity matters at institutions or journals is not always straightforward and concluded that institutional and journal websites should provide easily identifiable and visible information about whom to contact regarding research integrity or publication ethics concerns (Box 2). Institutions and journals should also consider using a dedicated, general, email address for research integrity issues to ensure continuity of contact that is immune to staff turnover. In addition, the experience, and sometimes frustration, of RIOs and journal editors is that after an issue is referred, there is often no further contact or follow up. To the extent possible and consistent with confidentiality requirements, institutions and journals

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<tr>
<th>Box 1. Recommendations to Enhance Partnerships Between Institutions and Journals to Address Concerns About Research Misconduct</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Proper contacts at institutions and journals: institutional and journal websites should provide easily identifiable and visible information about whom to contact regarding research integrity or publication ethics concerns, including specific email addresses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What to share between institutions and journals: RIOs and editors should adopt a transparent, collaborative, and trustful approach for handling issues of research misconduct and publication ethics. RIOs and editors should make themselves available for confidential phone conversations. If there are serious concerns but it is not clear whether the institution or the journal should be notified, a discussion of hypothetical scenarios is a good option, since it will protect the authors’ confidentiality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Correcting the research record: journal editors should describe journal’s practices and expectations to RIOs early in their communication. In most cases, journals do not need to know who is responsible for the invalid data to act, provided that sufficient information is provided by the institution. Proactive and reactive steps can be taken by both institutions and journals to uncouple the assessment of invalid and unreliable data from the institutional evaluations of culpability and intent of individuals to allow release of timely notices to the readers of the scholarly literature.</td>
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<td>• Changes to the need-to-know criteria for institutions: confidentiality regarding institutional research misconduct proceedings allows for an exception when there is a need to know. Institutions have typically interpreted need-to-know as a narrowly defined set of individuals. Under certain circumstances, earlier notification to the journal to correct or retract incorrect published work can be done in a manner consistent with the confidentiality principles and regulations.</td>
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<td>• Separation of data validity vs culpability and intent: correction of the research record at the earliest time possible, without negating the need for due process and confidentiality, can be accomplished by considering separation or uncoupling the issues of accuracy, validity, and veracity of the research record from the issues of culpability and intent of an individual.</td>
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<td>• Journal policy changes: the implementation of comprehensive changes to journal policies may be effectively achieved with the engagement of various organizations, like the Committee on Publication Ethics and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Journals could also update their “Information for Authors” to include a notice to the authors of the journal’s intent to contact an author’s institution when the authors’ response to a concern about the accuracy or integrity of the work is not satisfactory and that they may contact the author’s institution to seek help in resolving a serious concern about FFP.</td>
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Abbreviations: FFP, falsification, fabrication, or plagiarism; RIO, research integrity officer.

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<th>Box 2. Key Contacts at Institutions and Journals</th>
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<td><strong>Institutions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Research integrity officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Office of research integrity or compliance</td>
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<td>3. Associate vice president for research</td>
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<td>4. Vice president for research</td>
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<td>5. Office of research</td>
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<td><strong>Journals</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Editor-in-chief</td>
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<td>2. Executive editor</td>
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<td>3. Managing editor</td>
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<td>4. Research integrity manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Publishing ethics manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Contact us” on journal website</td>
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</table>
should provide timely responses to all communications regarding research integrity concerns, updates for any actions that may be taken, and continue the collaboration between institutional and journal partners until the issue is resolved.

What to Share Between Institutions and Journals

The working group recognized that interactions between institutions and journals may become tense when articles need to be corrected or retracted for reasons of FFP, because it is often unclear what information can be shared with the other party to allow taking appropriate action. The level of detail provided by institutions to journals varies from institution to institution, often leaving journals wondering whether the concerns were the result of in-depth review through a research misconduct proceeding. Similarly, the level of detail that journals provide to institutions about possible FFP varies from journal to journal. Some journals will not provide the review of the questioned data performed by the journal or publisher, responses from the author relevant to the questioned data that may have been provided to the journal, or previous versions of the manuscript that may have been submitted. The working group concluded that RIOs and editors should adopt a transparent, collaborative, and trustful approach for handling issues of research misconduct and publication ethics. RIOs and editors should make themselves available for confidential phone conversations, with discussions of hypothetical scenarios, to protect the authors’ confidentiality. This would also enable RIOs and editors to jointly make more efficient and timely evaluations of FFP concerns and to determine potential next steps. To the extent possible, both institutions and journals should limit further sharing of the information provided between institutions and journals with others. A detailed review of information to be shared is available elsewhere, and recommended practices for institutions and journals are summarized in Box 3.

Correcting the Research Record

The working group considered the difficulties related to correcting the research record in the context of US research misconduct proceedings because of the disparity in the time required for the institutional or journal process. If an allegation of FFP is raised during the journal peer review process

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<th>Box 3. Recommended Practices for Institutions and Journals</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Institutions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ensure timely responses to all concerns received from journals regarding research integrity matters.</td>
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<td>• Contact journals to discuss hypothetical scenarios when information is needed about how a journal will proceed.</td>
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<td>• In ongoing cases, the information provided to journals should be limited to the reliability of the (deidentified) data or other research in question, without disclosing the roles or identities of the involved researchers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provide sufficient information to journals to allow the correction of the research record, including forensic image analyses, other data analyses, or any other information related to the evaluation of the data that will help inform the journal’s actions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Limit additional sharing of any information provided by a journal to the extent possible.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• As needed and to the extent possible, continue communication with journals about institutional actions taken until the issue is resolved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Journals</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure timely responses to all concerns received from institutions regarding research integrity matters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consider contacting institutional RIOs to discuss hypothetical scenarios to determine whether concerns warrant institutional notification and potential next steps.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Focus on the accuracy and validity of the content or data and not on individual culpability and intent when considering action by the journal. If research misconduct proceedings are ongoing, do not expect institutions to share information about the culpability of the involved researchers or any other details about the proceedings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide RIOs with specific allegations of FFP and the necessary information to allow the institution to assess the concern, including relevant evaluations performed by the journal to facilitate institutional reviews and prevent duplicate efforts and relevant communications with the authors relating to the specific allegations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Limit additional sharing of any information provided by an institution to the extent possible.</td>
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Abbreviations: FFP, falsification, fabrication, or plagiarism; RIO, research integrity officer.
for a submitted manuscript, journals work to find the best solution, even though the time required for institutional reviews is likely outside the window of a standard peer review process. For published articles, the journal’s goal is to publish a correction or take another postpublication action, eg, publishing an expression of concern or a retraction. Some journals may delay taking any corrective action until the institution’s process is complete, thus leaving invalid data in the scholarly record, while other journals may proceed to correct the scholarly record based on the available information before the institution reaches its conclusions. Navigating a postpublication notice is often difficult for RIOs, who may be unaware of the practices of each specific journal. RIOs also tend to wait until a research misconduct investigation process is complete before contacting journals. The working group suggests that journal editors describe journal’s practices and expectations to RIOs early in their communications. In most cases, journals can act before knowing who is responsible for the invalid data if sufficient information is provided by the institution. Therefore, communication about problematic or invalid data by the RIO to a journal need not wait until the institution knows who is responsible for the incorrect data or until research misconduct proceedings are concluded. Proactive and reactive steps can be taken by both institutions and journals to uncouple the assessment of invalid and unreliable data from the institutional evaluations of culpability and intent of individuals to allow release of timely notices to the readers of the scholarly literature.

The Status Quo for Institution and Journal Interactions

For US institutions, it is critical to uphold the confidentiality requirements described in federal regulations and institutional policies (eg, federal regulation 42 CFR §93.108(b) states, “confidentiality must be maintained for any records or evidence from which research subjects might be identified. Disclosure is limited to those who have a need to know to carry out a research misconduct proceeding”). When research misconduct proceedings are ongoing, institutions usually do not share any information about the proceeding or even acknowledge that a proceeding is ongoing. US institutions often wait until research misconduct proceedings are resolved and at the end of the process, RIOs will work with the authors to contact journals to initiate corrections and retractions. Even after research misconduct findings are made, some institutions wait until there is concurrence with their findings from federal oversight agencies, when applicable, before releasing any information.

Journals primarily work with the corresponding author on behalf of the entire author group to evaluate and correct the scholarly record. Making the decision to contact an institution is a serious matter because journals do not want to harm the trusting relationship they share with their authors and are concerned about the consequences of prematurely or unnecessarily notifying the institution. Journals will typically escalate concerns to the institution when an author fails to respond to an editor’s questions or fails to provide satisfactory or convincing explanations. At that point, the journal might request that an institution evaluate the underlying data, since the institution has the capacity to access and authenticate the data. While journal-author collaborations may be entirely sufficient for managing most simple publication ethics issues, when concerns relate to matters of FFP, notifying authors about problematic data can result in significant problems for a research misconduct process, where the sequestration of research records is a crucial and required early step in the proceedings. When an author is made aware of an allegation of FFP before the institution is consulted, critical research records may be destroyed, transferred, or tampered with before the institution can properly preserve them, obstructing the process.

The result of these actions is that institutions and journals tend to work on these problems in isolation, with journals unaware of ongoing institutional proceedings, and vice versa. Consequently, a lack of adequate communication between institutions and journals can lead to different conclusions being reached about the accuracy of the same data, and there may be significant delays in correcting the research record.
Reconsideration of Research Misconduct Concepts to Improve Collaboration and Journal Policy Changes

Since every research integrity concern is unique and the severity of the concern is often not known initially, it is difficult to define precise best practices for when and with whom institutions and journals should interact. However, the working group believes changing the status quo for collaborations between institutions and journals is needed. Our suggestions may seem contradictory to current practices, but we believe that institutions and journals should strive to promote and adopt these changes, even incrementally, and put forth this call-to-action.

The key areas that would improve collaboration between institutions and journals are (1) broadening institutions’ interpretation of the federal concept of need-to-know (i.e., confidential or sensitive information and data are not disclosed unless there is a need for an individual to know the facts to perform specific jobs or functions), (2) uncoupling of evaluating the accuracy and validity of research from determining the culpability and intent of the individuals involved, and (3) initiating widespread changes in journal and publisher policies regarding the timing and appropriateness for contacting institutions so that they are contacted before contacting the authors (or concurrently, where appropriate).

Changes to the Need-to-Know Criteria for Institutions

Confidentiality regarding institutional research misconduct proceedings allows for an exception when there is a need to know. Institutions have typically interpreted need-to-know as the most narrowly defined set of individuals to ensure a thorough, competent, objective, and fair research misconduct proceeding. Since journals also work to uphold similar standards of academic excellence as institutions, their relationship to research misconduct proceedings involving work published in their journals can inherently qualify them as an entity that needs to know. The working group agrees that under certain circumstances, earlier notification to the journals to correct or retract incorrect published work can be done in a manner consistent with the confidentiality provision of the federal regulation.20

Since restrictions on institutions to share information only with those who have a need to know center around reputational harm to the involved parties, RIOs should advise journal editors about confidentiality requirements to minimize any reputational harm to involved parties and the importance of limiting further sharing of any information provided by the RIO. At the outset of a misconduct proceeding, it is unlikely that a journal would fall within those who need to know; however, as the process advances and the institution confirms that specific inaccuracies need to be corrected in the research record, an institution should consider that a journal needs to know about the unreliable data, even if the research misconduct process is not fully completed.

Likewise, when serious concerns of potential FFP cannot be resolved by the journal, journals should recognize that institutions have a need to know about the concerns. Journals should share information with the institutions about their review and evaluation of problematic data. But journals also must recognize that RIOs maintain strict confidentiality about all allegations once a process is initiated; therefore, the institution may limit some communication with the journal about proceedings that are underway.

Separation of Data Validity vs Culpability and Intent

A goal for both institutions and journals is the correction of the research record at the earliest time possible, without negating the need for due process and confidentiality. This goal can be accomplished by considering separation or uncoupling the issues of accuracy, validity, and veracity of the research record from the issues of culpability and intent of an individual. Institutions can often demonstrate early in their review process that certain data are inaccurate or that FFP has occurred, even though it may take much longer to establish the responsibility or intent of a researcher (the latter being a requirement for a research misconduct finding). Notifying journals as soon as data inaccuracies or FFP are substantiated would allow journals to expedite their process for corrections.
rather than delaying the action until the research misconduct proceedings are complete. Thus, it should be possible that as soon as an institution can demonstrate that there are significant concerns with the integrity of the data, RIOs, in consultation with institutional legal counsel and senior leadership, can confidentially notify journals about the problematic data, allowing the journal to move forward with its processes without needing to discuss the research misconduct proceeding or the individuals involved.

In the context of FFP and considering making necessary corrections, journals should focus only on data accuracy and validity, and not on individual culpability and intent. While journals may want to know specific details about a research misconduct proceeding, they should be mindful that the RIO is balancing the interest of correcting the research record with the obligations of confidentiality and other legal requirements (e.g., the US Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act that protects the privacy of students [20 USC §1232g21; 34 CFR Part 9922]). Journals should expect sufficient information about the content or data that involves verifiable FFP but should not expect institutions to share information about the involved researchers, such as whether a researcher is currently, or has recently been, investigated for serious concerns including misconduct or specific fact-finding that occurred in a research misconduct proceeding.

**Journal Policy Changes**

Implementation of comprehensive changes to journal policies may be effectively achieved with the engagement of various organizations, like the Committee on Publication Ethics or STM. Change will require raising awareness to the broader publishing and RIO communities about the challenges encountered when reporting FFP concerns to institutions, including whom to contact and when.

Since journals have the responsibility to include statements in their “Information for Authors” regarding ethics in publishing and author responsibility and accountability, the addition of cautionary statements to authors may help increase awareness of FFP and its consequences. For example, journals that follow the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors’ authorship criteria require authors to indicate that they agree “to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.” This criterion should be included in the “Information for Authors” and included in authorship forms that are required to be submitted by authors before publication for all journals.

Journals could also update their “Information for Authors” to include a notice to the authors of the journal’s intent to contact an author’s institution when the authors’ response to a concern about the accuracy or integrity of the work is not satisfactory (e.g., the concern cannot be explained as honest error or managed by publishing a correction). Furthermore, the “Information for Authors” could state that if editors identify what they believe to be a serious concern of FFP, they may contact the author’s institution to seek help in resolving the issue and that this may occur without the knowledge of the author. Finally, authors should be made aware that with FFP concerns, the editor may contact officials at the author’s institution for assistance with publishing corrections, errata, and retractions as needed to ensure the integrity of the published literature.

**Conclusions**

The working group concludes that changing the status quo would enable effective communication between the institutions and journals. Using confidentiality clauses and agreements to impede sharing does not benefit the scientific community nor the integrity of the research record. However, a careful and informed framework for improving communications and sharing information between institutions and journals can foster better working relationships, trust, and faster resolution to data integrity issues, especially in published literature, as Thorpe has recently suggested. Both journals and institutional organizations should recognize that steps are needed beyond current boundaries.
to achieve progress. When in doubt, informal and hypothetical conversations between parties can help inform both parties on next steps.

The working group believes that the concepts arising from our discussions can be used as a framework to help maintain the reliability of the published research record. Our hope is that US institutions and the journals interacting with them will embrace our call-to-action. The working group also hopes that these practices can be adapted for international research institutions and journals by incorporating local customs and standards. Overall, we anticipate the creation of a path to better communication that solidifies the critical partnership between journals and institutions and, as a result, supports the integrity of science.

ARTICLE INFORMATION
Accepted for Publication: May 8, 2023.
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Author Contributions: Dr Garfinkel and Ms Qualkenbusch had full access to all of the data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

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Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: Baskin, Bennett, Engler, Graf, Imperiale, King, Kulp, Mankowski, Nugent, Wainstock, Wilfong, Wold.

Drafting of the manuscript: Garfinkel, Alam, Baskin, Bennett, Carruthers, Graf, Imperiale, King, Mankowski, Nugent, Pulvirenti, Qualkenbusch, Sobiecki, Wold, Yucel.

Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Garfinkel, Alam, Baskin, Bennett, Carruthers, Engler, Flanagin, Garrity, Graf, Imperiale, King, Kleinert, Kulp, Mankowski, Nugent, Pulvirenti, Qualkenbusch, Wold, Yucel.

Obtained funding: Garfinkel, Garrity, Qualkenbusch.

Administrative, technical, or material support: Garrity, Graf, Imperiale, King, Mankowski, Qualkenbusch, Wainstock, Wold, Yucel.

Supervision: Garfinkel, Graf, Mankowski, Qualkenbusch, Wold.

Other: Flanagin.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: Dr Graf reported being employed by Springer Nature. No other disclosures were reported.
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**Disclaimer:** Ms Flanagin is the Executive Managing Editor for *JAMA* and the JAMA Network, but she was not involved in any of the decisions regarding review of the manuscript or its acceptance. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of their institutions or employers. Dr Garrity's participation in this working group was not done in her capacity as a US federal employee.

**Additional Contributions:** Linda Neidhardt, BA (Office of Research Compliance and Office of Secure Research, The Ohio State University), provided logistical and administrative support. She was not compensated for this work.

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June 28, 2023 9/9

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