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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Special Articles: Commentary

Issues with the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)

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Abstract

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has established a set of recommendations, the Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals. These recommendations are not just recommendations, they are a widely accepted, or imposed, ethical rule book for the biomedical community, implying that members must be compliant with these rules. Given the importance and power of such a set of recommendations, it is important to establish clearly who, or what, exactly is the ICMJE. Given the fact that the ICMJE is a committee, there must be a leadership corps and physical headquarters. It was recently learned, through a science watchdog blog, Retraction Watch, that Darren B. Taichman, who used to be the editor-in-chief of *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)*, is the current secretary of the ICMJE. Surprisingly, this information is not indicated on the ICMJE (<http://www.icmje.org/>) website. Four pillars of ethics are trust, honesty, accountability and transparency. Dr. Taichman was contacted twice to inquire about these issues. After a third request, copied to Christine Laine, a fairly superficial response was received. This commentary examines what the relative lack of transparency by Taichman and Laine indicates, and why it constitutes a risk to ethics integrity of biomedical journals around the world.

Keywords: Conflict of Interest, Dishonesty, Inconsistency, Opacity and Lack of Transparency, Power, Trust.

Introduction: What and Who is the ICMJE?

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, 2017a) is a very powerful group. This is because this committee created a set of rules that are, according to the ICMJE, widely employed (“followed”) by a range of biomedical journals across the globe (ICMJE, 2017b). What is noticeably odd about that ICMJE page are the following statements (Fig. 1): “The ICMJE cannot verify the completeness or accuracy of this list”, “There may be some journals that follow

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the ICMJE recommendations, but have never requested listing”, and “There may be some listed journals that do not follow all of the many recommendations and policies in the document.” What these three statements indicate is that the information on the ICMJE page regarding the journals that the ICMJE claims to be following the ICMJE recommendations may be both inaccurate and incorrect. These statements are of concern because they also indicate that the list may be incomplete. Finally, the third statement indicates that some journals claim to follow the ICMJE guidelines, but do not follow all the guidelines, making such guidelines meaningless and powerless because they are not uniformly followed, or implemented.

The screenshot shows a webpage titled "Journals Following the ICMJE Recommendations". On the left is a sidebar with a "Journal Listing Request Form" link and a FAQ section. The FAQ question is "Which journals follow the Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals (ICMJE Recommendations)?" with a "View Answer" link. The main content area has a heading "Journals Following the ICMJE Recommendations" and a paragraph stating that the following is a list of journals whose editors or publishers have contacted the ICMJE to request listing. Below this is a sub-heading "The ICMJE cannot verify the completeness or accuracy of this list." followed by a bulleted list. The first two items in the list are underlined in red: "There may be some journals that follow the ICMJE recommendations, but have never requested listing." and "There may be some listed journals that do not follow all of the many recommendations and policies in the document." Below the list are three paragraphs: "Journals listed or considering listing should understand that the ICMJE periodically updates the Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals.", "If journals wish to be added or deleted from this list, please use the Journal Listing Request Form.", and "Authors and others with questions about the processes or policies of a specific journal should consult that journal directly."

Fig. 1. Journals Following the ICMJE Recommendations

Notes: *Fig. 1* The ICMJE claims that 3147 non-member journals follow its recommendations. However, it raises strong doubt about the validity and accuracy of these members and list. Red underline indicates these inconsistencies and also troubling statements that wash the ICMJE’s hands free of accountability. Source: ICMJE, 2017b.

If this list is inaccurate, and if the ICMJE is unable to verify, or take responsibility, for the accuracy of this list, monitor its members or hold them accountable for not following the ICMJE recommendations, then what is the value of this list – and thus the ICMJE – to the biomedical community? So, at the outset, one of the most important aspects about the ICMJE, its recommendations [see *Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals*] (ICMJE, 2017c), hereafter ICMJE recommendations, and the breadth of usage, is unclear, and thus unreliable. Consequently, any member of the biomedical community that reads the ICMJE website carefully is left with a first negative impression, and mistrust. Four essential pillars of ethics are trust, honesty, accountability and transparency. If the integrity of the first two pillars are at risk, when discussing issues related to the ICMJE, then how stable are the remaining pillars?

The ICMJE is one of a few globally established ethics organizations. According to the inaccurate list provided by the ICMJE, the ICMJE recommendations (latest version is dated December, 2016) are claimed to be followed by 3147 journals (number was accurate on February 23, 2017), but what is unclear is how many of these journals are (a) not following the ICMJE recommendations, and why not, and (b) how many of these 3147 journals are actually following publishing ethics rigorously? In other words, is it possible that journals or publishers that are not following strict ethical publishing principles, including “predatory” journals, are claiming to follow the ICMJE recommendations, when in fact they are not? Are unscholarly journals using the name of the ICMJE to legitimize their journals without the knowledge of the ICMJE? To better understand why this list is so inaccurate, I attempted to identify the ICMJE leadership on the ICMJE website so as to address these queries and concerns.

Inconsistent Information Related to the ICMJE

To identify who, or what, exactly is the ICMJE, the following important statements were found (ICMJE, 2017d) [see Fig. 2A, top]: “The ICMJE (previously known as the Vancouver Group) is not an open membership organization. It is a small working group of general medical journals. Occasionally, the ICMJE will invite a new member or guest when the committee feels that the new journal or organization will provide a needed perspective that is not already available within the existing committee. Open membership organizations for editors and others in biomedical publication include the World Association of Medical Editors and the Council of Science Editors.” This indicates that the ICMJE is a closed organization, but offers two exceptions: to the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME, 2017a) and the Council of Science Editors (CSE, 2017a). Why are only these two organizations singled out?

How can I join the ICMJE? **A**

The ICMJE (previously known as the Vancouver Group) is not an open membership organization. It is a small working group of general medical journals. Occasionally, the ICMJE will invite a new member or guest when the committee feels that the new journal or organization will provide a needed perspective that is not already available within the existing committee. Open membership organizations for editors and others in biomedical publication include the World Association of Medical Editors and the Council of Science Editors. However, if your journal follows the ICMJE's Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals and you would like the ICMJE to include it on the list of journals that follow ICMJE policy on www.ICMJE.org, just complete the request form. If you include the URL for your journal's web site, we can post a link from www.ICMJE.org to your journal.

Which journals are members of the ICMJE?

Annals of Internal Medicine, British Medical Journal, Bulletin of the World Health Organization, Deutsches Ärzteblatt (German Medical Journal), Ethiopian Journal of Health Sciences, JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association), Journal of Korean Medical Science, New England Journal of Medicine, New Zealand Medical Journal, PLOS Medicine, The Lancet, Revista Médica de Chile (Medical Journal of Chile), and Ugeskrift for Læger (Danish Medical Journal). However, a large number of non-member journals reports that they follow the ICMJE's Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly work in Medical Journals.

About ICMJE

The ICMJE is a small working group of general medical journal editors whose participants meet annually and fund their own work on the Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals. The ICMJE invites comments on this document and suggestions for agenda items.

The current members of the ICMJE are Annals of Internal Medicine, British Medical Journal, Bulletin of the World Health Organization, Deutsches Ärzteblatt (German Medical Journal), Ethiopian Journal of Health Sciences, JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association), Journal of Korean Medical Science, New England Journal of Medicine, New Zealand Medical Journal, PLOS Medicine, The Lancet, Revista Médica de Chile (Medical Journal of Chile), Ugeskrift for Læger (Danish Medical Journal), the U.S. National Library of Medicine, and the World Association of Medical Editors.

Contact ICMJE **B**

Use this form to send comments or questions to the ICMJE secretariat. Before sending an inquiry, please consult Frequently Asked Questions, as this section of the Web site provides answers to the most commonly asked questions.

Please do not direct inquiries about individual studies, individual journal styles, or individual journal policies to the ICMJE secretariat office. The ICMJE does not archive individual journal contact information. Manuscripts intended for submission to a journal must be sent directly to the journal, not to the ICMJE.

Note: We cannot respond to requests for medical advice.

★ Full Name:

★ Email address:

Daytime phone:

★ Your comment or question:

0 of 1200 max characters used.

[SEND COMMENTS](#)

C

Inquiries

Before sending an inquiry, please consult Frequently Asked Questions, as this section of the Web site provides answers to the most commonly asked questions.

Inquiries about the ICMJE Recommendations should be sent to the ICMJE Secretariat office by using the form within Contact ICMJE. Please do not direct inquiries about individual studies, individual journal styles, or individual journal policies to the ICMJE secretariat office. The ICMJE does not archive individual journal contact information. Manuscripts and Conflict of Interest Forms intended for submission to a journal must be sent directly to the journal, not to the ICMJE.

Fig. 2. ICMJE Memberships

Notes: Fig. 2 (A) The ICMJE page indicates that the ICMJE is a closed member organization. It refers to two other ethical bodies, WAME and the CSE, for those in search of open membership. It then lists the current ICMJE members. (B) The ICMJE contact page lists no physical or postal address, telephone number or email. (C) The list of ICMJE members on another ICMJE page does not correspond to the same list indicated in Fig. 2A. This page also refers to an ICMJE Secretariat office, but offers no indication of this office's address. Sources: ICMJE, 2017d (A); ICMJE, 2017e (B); ICMJE, 2017f (C).

The same page that defines what the ICMJE is and is not, lists the ICMJE member journals, as follows (Fig. 2A, bottom): “Annals of Internal Medicine, British Medical Journal, Bulletin of the World Health Organization, Deutsches Ärzteblatt (German Medical Journal), Ethiopian Journal of Health Sciences, JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association), Journal of Korean Medical Science, New England Journal of Medicine, New Zealand Medical Journal, PLOS Medicine, The Lancet, Revista Médica de Chile (Medical Journal of Chile), and Ugeskrift for Læger (Danish Medical Journal).” It completes this list by stating that “However, a large number of non-member

journals reports that they follow the ICMJE's Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly work in Medical Journals.” The second statement is in fact irrelevant because the ICMJE has already indicated that it is unclear which of these 3147 journals actually or faithfully follows the ICMJE recommendations, and since the ICMJE seems unable to actually verify the accuracy of this list.

In a bid to clarify these issues, concerns and discrepancies, the “contact” page (ICMJE, 2017e) only lists a contact form, and no physical address, or even email (Fig. 2B). From the “contact” page, in an attempt to better understand who exactly is responsible for the ICMJE, or what the leadership structure of this organization is, the “about” page (ICMJE, 2017f) can be accessed. On that page, the ICMJE is defined slightly differently than on the ICMJE membership page discussed above, as follows: “The ICMJE is a small working group of general medical journal editors whose participants meet annually and fund their own work on the Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals. The ICMJE invites comments on this document and suggestions for agenda items.” The list of members on this list does not accurately match the list on the membership page (ICMJE, 2017b), and includes two members that do not appear on the membership page: “the U.S. National Library of Medicine, and the World Association of Medical Editors” (Fig. 2C). This discrepancy in information indicates that the ICMJE is publicly advertising two different versions of facts, or “alternative facts.”

Relative Opacity by the ICMJE

Concerned with these discrepancies, I continued to try and identify the ICMJE leadership. On the “about ICMJE” page, the only clue as to the definitive existence of a leadership lay in this statement “Inquiries about the ICMJE Recommendations should be sent to the ICMJE Secretariat office by using the form within Contact ICMJE”.

Darren B. Taichman, MD, PhD, Secretary, ICMJE, Executive Deputy Editor, *Annals of Internal Medicine*

A

Corresponding Author: Darren B. Taichman, MD, PhD, American College of Physicians, 190 N. Independence Mall West, Philadelphia, PA 19106; e-mail, dtaichman@acponline.org.

B

Search Results

Results 1 - 3 of about 3 for **secretary**.

The URM: Twenty-five Years Old

... Augusta Litwer, a **secretary** to the eminent nephrologist Belding Scribner, grew tired of retyping his papers to change the format of references when ...
<http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/archives/summary78-04.pdf> - 2014-02-03 - 76k

Editorial

... Internal Medicine Cynthia Mulrow, MD, MSc. **Secretary**, ICMJE Senior Deputy Editor, *Annals of Internal Medicine* Catherine ...
http://www.icmje.org/news-and-editorials/updated_coi_jul2010.pdf - 2010-06-24 - 19k

Sharing Clinical Trial Data: A Proposal From the International ...

... Darren B. Taichman, MD, PhD, **Secretary**, ICMJE, Executive Deputy Editor, *Annals of Internal Medicine* Joyce Backus, MSLS, Representative and ...
<http://www.icmje.org/news-and-editorials/M15-2928-PAP.pdf> - 2016-01-08 - 30k

C

Jeffrey M. Drazen, MD
 Editor-in-Chief, *New England Journal of Medicine*

Peter W. de Leeuw, MD, PhD
 Editor-in-Chief, *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde (Dutch Journal of Medicine)*

Christine Laine, MD, MPH
 Editor, *Annals of Internal Medicine*

Cynthia Mulrow, MD, MSc
 Secretary, ICMJE
 Senior Deputy Editor, *Annals of Internal Medicine*

Catherine D. DeAngelis, MD, MPH
 Editor-in-Chief, *JAMA*

D

Secretariats
 Jane Smith (*British Medical Journal*)
 Kathleen Case (*Annals of Internal Medicine*)
 Marcia Angell (*New England Journal of Medicine*)
 Faith McClellan (*Annals of Internal Medicine*)
 Christine Laine (*Annals of Internal Medicine*)+

Fig. 3. Relative Opacity with the Managerial Structure of the ICMJE

Notes: Fig. 3 (A) A 2016 editorial PDF file on the ICMJE website indicates that Darren B. Taichman is the 2016 ICMJE secretary, listed at the American College of Physicians (ACP), and

the Executive Deputy Editor of the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (AIM), which is published by the ACP. (B) The search for “secretary” on the ICMJE website only reveals three search results. (C) The ICMJE secretary is listed as being Cynthia Mulrow and also as the Senior Deputy Editor of AIM, while Christine Laine is also listed as an AIM editor. (D) A historical 2004 document lists Laine, in a 1978-2003 profile, as one of the five ICMJE Secretariats, alongside two other individuals from AIM. Sources: ICMJE, 2017i (A); ICMJE, 2017j (B); ICMJE, 2017h (C); ICMJE, 2017g (D).

In other words, information on the ICMJE pages is looped, but finally, the public is still left without understanding the managerial structure of the ICMJE, except for the fact that there is an “ICMJE Secretariat office”. Entering the term “secretary” into the search function of the ICMJE website indicates that the secretary, at least in January, 2016, was Darren B. Taichman, listed at the American College of Physicians (ICMJE, 2017e). Dr. Taichman was also listed on the same document as the Executive Deputy Editor of the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (AIM) (Fig. 3A). Also, while searching for the term “secretary” on the ICMJE website, a historic 2004 document was discovered that indicated that individuals representing several members of the ICMJE in 2017 were also members back in 1978-2003 (ICMJE, 2017g). That document is also important because it indicates that the ICMJE recommendations were not always known as the ICMJE recommendations, but had an earlier version, the “Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals”, or URMs. In fact, in August of 2013, the ICMJE changed the term of their ethical recommendations for the biomedical research and publishing communities, including guidelines for authorship and conflicts of interest, from URM to the ICMJE recommendations. The second of three hits for the term “secretary” on the ICMJE website (Fig. 3B) revealed another historical ICMJE document, dated June 2010, related to ICMJE guidelines for authors’ conflicts of interest, that indicates that the ICMJE secretary was Cynthia Mulrow, who is now currently listed as the Senior Deputy Editor of AIM (ICMJE, 2017h; Fig. 3C).

So, on the ICMJE website, the public is only privy to three facts about who the ICMJE secretary is: for 1978-2003, five secretariats are listed (Jane Smith of the *BMJ* (*British Medical Journal*), Marcia Angell of *NEJM* (*New England Journal of Medicine*), and three members of AIM, Kathleen Case, Faith McClellan, and Christine Laine; Fig. 3D), in 2010, it was Cynthia Mulrow, and in 2016, it was Darren B. Taichman. Other than this, it is unknown who the 2017 ICMJE secretary is because the ICMJE website lists no structural organograms about its leadership, including the current secretary. A search for the terms “leadership”, “president”, “structure”, “director” and other terms that could possibly reveal the ICMJE website page that lists the ICMJE leadership structure, such as the President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer and individuals who traditionally hold clear positions and play specific functions within a committee, revealed no such information. I was thus left with the following two queries: a) is there a *de facto* leadership with specific positions, as would occur in other organizations of equal size and repute, such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), which lists the members of its governance, trustees, council, team, sub-committees and past council members (alumni) in detail (COPE, 2017a; COPE, 2017b; Fig. 4A, 4B), WAME (WAME, 2017b; Fig. 4C) or the CSE (CSE, 2017b; CSE, 2017c; Fig. 4D), which list members of their organizations clearly to the public? b) if at least the ICMJE lists the past secretaries in documents found randomly distributed over the ICMJE website, then why can no other individuals with specified positions be found?

A

B

C

D

Fig. 4. Screenshots of COPE, ICMJE and CSE websites

Notes: *Fig. 4 (A) The COPE website, unlike the ICMJE website, clearly shows the different hierarchical structures that make up its organization and (B) leadership (select individuals shown, as an example). (C) Similarly, WAME is transparent about the individuals that make up its various committees, identifying its leadership clearly, like COPE (select individuals / committees shown, as an example). (D) The CSE is also transparent about the individual makeup of its leadership and committees. Notable public figures in the world of publishing ethics indicated by red arrows, some of which appear in more than one ethical organizations (brief mention in this paper only). Sources: COPE, 2017a (A); COPE, 2017b (B); WAME, 2017a (C); CSE, 2017b (top) and CSE, 2017c (bottom) (D).*

Is the ICMJE truly a Committee?

Confused that perhaps I was unclear about what the term “committee” means, especially since the same term is also used by COPE in the title of its organization, I searched for a broad definition of the word “committee”, if possible within the context of ethics or medicine, and found the following three definitions (only partial descriptions have been written): “a body of people delegated to perform some function” (Free dictionary, 2017; Fig. 5A), “a person or group of persons elected or appointed to perform some service or function, as to investigate, report on, or act upon a particular matter” (Dictionary.com, 2017; Fig. 5B), and “a body of one or more persons that is subordinate to a deliberative assembly” (Wikipedia, 2017; Fig. 5C). The common denominator to all of these definitions is person or people. This indicates that either the ICMJE has no defined hierarchical or organizational structure, except for a secretary, or that it is hiding the details of the leadership of its organization from the public.

A**committee** [kō-mit'ee]

a body of people delegated to perform some function.

ethics committee a group of individuals formed to protect the interests of patients and address moral issues. It

B**committee** 

[kuh-mit-ee]

[Examples](#) [Word Origin](#)
[See more synonyms on Thesaurus.com](#)
noun

1. a person or group of persons elected or appointed to perform some service or function, as to investigate, report on, or act upon a particular matter.

C**Committee**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

For other uses, see [Committee \(disambiguation\)](#).

A **committee** (or "commission") is a body of one or more persons that is subordinate to a [deliberative assembly](#).

Fig. 5. Definitions of the Term “Committee”

Notes: *Fig. 5 (A, B, C) Three definitions of the term “committee”. Sources: Free dictionary, 2017 (A); Dictionary.com, 2017 (B); Wikipedia, 2017 (C).*

The former is problematic because, if true, and there is only a secretary, then in fact the ICMJE is not a real committee and thus the name and acronym are misleading. In such a case, the ICMJE is at best, a loose group of individuals, perhaps linked by a common interest in medicine, medical writing, or biomedical ethics, not unlike a club or society, but without a defined leadership, except for a secretary, or perhaps only an administrative office, labeled misleadingly as the “ICMJE Secretariat office”. In this former case, it is incomprehensible that this leading global biomedical ethics organization would not have a well-structured, clear, and hierarchical leadership whose members and positions are open to the public and clearly demarcated on the ICMJE website. If the latter case is true, then this is even more problematic, because it indicates that the ICMJE is being blatantly dishonest and opaque about its organization’s leadership and structure, by not displaying all “people” with a portfolio, or representatives of member journals.

ICMJE: Historical Marriage to the *Annals of Internal Medicine*

What was particularly noticeable about several of the documents found on the ICMJE website was a certain repetitive theme: the *Annals of Internal Medicine* or *AIM*. One name in particular stands out, Christine Laine, the current editor-in-chief (EIC) of *AIM* ([AIM, 2017a](#); Fig. 6A). Laine also serves on the CSE’s editorial policy committee ([CSE, 2017d](#); Fig. 6B), and is also member of the WAME ethics and policy committee (Fig. 4C), having been associated with the ICMJE for a long time, possibly as the ICMJE Secretariat from 1978-2003, as indicated by the historic 2004 PDF file indicated above. An inter-ethics organizational analysis will be discussed in detail elsewhere, and forms part of a wider project aimed at examining ethical exceptionalism among global academic ethics organizations ([Teixeira da Silva, 2017](#)).

Biographies of *Annals* Staff

Editor in Chief

Christine Laine, MD, MPH



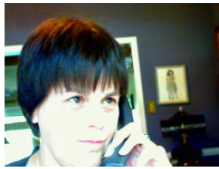
Christine Laine, MD, MPH, is Editor in Chief of *Annals of Internal Medicine*. She is a practicing physician in Philadelphia and is board-certified in internal medicine. Dr. Laine is a Clinical Associate Professor in the Division of Internal Medicine at Jefferson Medical College. Dr. Laine first joined *Annals of Internal Medicine* in June 1995 as an Associate Editor and became a Deputy Editor in 1998 and Senior Deputy Editor in April 2008. In July 2009, Dr. Laine became the Editor in Chief and a Senior Vice President at the American College of Physicians.

Dr. Laine graduated summa cum laude, with a double major in biology and writing, from Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. She received her medical degree from State University of New York at Stony Brook and completed residency training in internal medicine at The New York Hospital (Cornell University) and a fellowship in general internal medicine and clinical epidemiology at Beth Israel Hospital (Harvard University). Dr. Laine earned her master of public health degree, with a concentration in quantitative methods and clinical epidemiology, at Harvard University.

Dr. Laine is active in the world of medical journalism and holds leadership positions in the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, the Council of Science Editors, and the Ethics committee of the World Association of Medical Editors. She has been instrumental in the development of editorial policy about such issues as authorship and conflicts of interest in medical research.

Deputy Editors [Link to ICMJE not indicated](#)

Cynthia D. Mulrow, MD, MSc



Cindy is Senior Deputy Editor of *Annals of Internal Medicine* and Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. She has been Program Director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Generalist Physician Faculty Scholars Program and Director of the San Antonio Cochrane Collaboration Center and the San Antonio Evidence-based Practice Center. She was elected to the American Society of Clinical Investigation in 1997, honored as a Master of the ACP in 2005, and elected to the Institute of Medicine in 2008.

Cindy's academic work followed several themes including systematic reviews, research methodology, and chronic medical conditions. She has authored numerous papers and served on guideline panels including the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. She currently contributes to groups who set standards for reporting research: PRISMA (systematic reviews and meta-analyses), STROBE (observational studies), and CONSORT (clinical trials). She is an amateur decorator, a gardener without a green thumb, and an avid but flagging runner and swimmer.

Darren B. Taichman, MD, PhD



Darren Taichman is Executive Deputy Editor of *Annals of Internal Medicine*. He practices Pulmonary and Critical Care medicine, specializing in pulmonary vascular disease, at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Medicine. Dr. Taichman first joined *Annals of Internal Medicine* as Associate Editor for Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine in 2007. He became a Deputy Editor in 2009 and Executive Deputy Editor in 2010.

Dr. Taichman earned his bachelor's degree in 1982, a PhD in Pathology in 1992, and an MD in 1993 from the University of Pennsylvania. He completed residency training in Internal Medicine at Harvard's Beth Israel Hospital, Boston, and Pulmonary and Critical Care Fellowships at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. He completed research fellowships in vascular biology at the Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. He joined the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania in 2000 as the Director of the Medical Intensive Care Unit at Penn Presbyterian Medical Center and Associate Director of Penn's Pulmonary Vascular Disease Program. His research has focused in endothelial cell biology and the epidemiology of pulmonary arterial hypertension. He joined the Education and Publication Division of the American College of Physicians in 2007 as a Senior Medical Associate.

In addition to his work at *Annals*, Dr. Taichman is active in national and international leadership positions within the American College of Chest Physicians, the Pulmonary Hypertension Association, and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

B Editorial Policy Committee

Editorial Policy Committee Members
Total Members: 31

[Laine](#)

Christine

Committee
Member

[Annals of Internal Medicine](#)

Last Name	First Name	Role Or Section	Company
Hadsell	Kelly	Chair	KWF Editorial Services

[Link to ICMJE not indicated](#)

Fig. 6. Profiles of Editors

Notes: Fig. 6 (A) Dr. Christine Laine is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (AIM), published by the American College of Physicians. On their AIM profiles, Cynthia Mulrow and Darren B. Taichman are listed as Senior and Executive Deputy Editors of AIM, respectively. (B) In her CSE profile, Laine does not indicate any link to the ICMJE. Sources: AIM, 2017a (A); AIM, 2017d (B).

The Laine AIM page profile states “Dr. Laine is active in the world of medical journalism and holds leadership positions in the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, the Council of Science Editors, and the Ethics committee of the World Association of Medical Editors.” Although it has now been discovered precisely what Laine’s roles in the CSE and WAME are (even so, the name of the WAME committee is factually incorrectly stated), her precise “leadership position” at the ICMJE is not stated, neither on her AIM page, nor on any website on the ICMJE website. On the CSE page, Laine is only listed as being associated with AIM, but no mention is made about her association with the ICMJE. Does this attitude amount to an act of dishonesty,

hidden conflicts of interest (COIs), opacity, or all or none of these? Readers should also take close notice of the complexity of the CSE website URL, making it prone to errors and difficult to trace, for example in a Google search. If one scrolls down the same *AIM* page where Laine is listed as the *AIM* EIC, readers will be surprised to also observe Cynthia Mulrow and Darren B. Taichman listed as Senior and Executive Deputy Editors of *AIM*, respectively (Fig. 6A). Mulrow's profile does not indicate her past association with the ICMJE as the ICMJE secretary (see Fig. 3C), and Taichman's profile states only the following about his association with the ICMJE: "In addition to his work at *Annals*, Dr. Taichman is active in national and international leadership positions within the American College of Chest Physicians, the Pulmonary Hypertension Association, and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors." That description is also highly misleading because it does not indicate the precise "international leadership position" title within the ICMJE, but which the public now knows is the secretary.

What these trails of hints and flecks of information indicate is that there appears to be a strong link between the ICMJE and *AIM*, which is published by the American College of Physicians (ACP). In fact, the copyright notice of the ICMJE website indicates that the copyright belongs to the ICMJE, but that the site is designed and hosted by *AIM* / ACP (Fig. 7A).

A

The ICMJE is a small group of general medical journal editors and representatives of selected related organizations working together to improve the quality of medical science and its reporting. ICMJE meets annually to refine its *Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals*. Although ICMJE is not an open membership organization, it welcomes comments on the *Recommendations*.

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Site designed and hosted by *Annals of Internal Medicine* / American College of Physicians.

B

Acknowledgments

The following members of the ICMJE helped author the 1997 version and should be acknowledged in citations of the May 2000 version.

Linda Hawes Clever, *Western Journal of Medicine*; Lois Ann Colaianni, U.S. National Library of Medicine; George Lundberg, *JAMA*; Richard G. Robinson, *New Zealand Medical Journal*; Richard Smith, *BMJ*; Bruce P. Squires, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*; Martin VanDer Weyden, *The Medical Journal of Australia*; and Patricia Woolf, Princeton University.

Inquiries about the Uniform Requirements only should be sent to Kathleen Case at the ICMJE secretariat office, American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine, 190 N. Independence Mall West, Philadelphia, PA 19106-1572, USA. Phone, 215-351-2660; fax, 215-351-2644; e-mail: kathyc@mail.acponline.org. Please do not send inquiries about individual journal styles and policies to this address.

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C

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Fig. 7. Addresses of ICMJE Secretariat Office and *AIM*'s Contact Address

Notes: Fig. 7 (A) The *AIM* / ACP designed and hosts the ICMJE website, as indicated by the copyright notice. (B) An archived 2000 ICMJE document shows that 17 years ago, the ICMJE secretariat office was at an address in Philadelphia. (C) Curiously, the precise same address is listed as *AIM*'s contact address. Sources: ICMJE, 2017a (A); Wayback Machine, 2017 (B); *AIM*, 2017b (C).

The global biomedical academic public can thus safely assume, based on this strong evidence, even if fragmented, that the ACP owns, runs or manages the ICMJE, and that the senior leadership of *AIM* is also the core and/or senior leadership of the ICMJE. This is fortified by the earliest archived document about the ICMJE found on the Wayback Machine (internet archive), dated from August 2000 (Wayback Machine, 2017), which also shows the association between the ICMJE and the ACP, listing the ICMJE secretariat office as "American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal

Medicine, 190 N. Independence Mall West, Philadelphia, PA 19106-1572, USA” (Fig. 7B), which corresponds to the current physical address (AIM, 2017b; Fig. 7C). If true, then this would add a very interesting ethical and COI-based twist to the self-describing statement made by the ICMJE on its website top-page and elsewhere: “The ICMJE is a small group of general medical journal editors and representatives of selected related organizations working together” (Fig. 7A).

ICMJE: Surprising Revelations

In a surprising and highly unexpected discovery, it was found on January 13, 2017 that Taichman is apparently the current ICMJE secretary, a fact that could not be gleaned from the ICMJE website, but was in fact discovered on the website of a science watchdog, Retraction Watch (Retraction Watch, 2017; Fig. 8A).

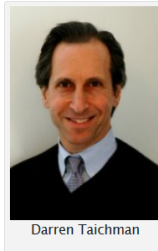
A Retraction Watch

Tracking retractions

Watch out for predatory journals, and consider retract/replace, suggests medical journal group

without comments

The challenges facing science publishing are ever-evolving, and so too are the recommendations for how to face them. As such, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) frequently updates its advice to authors. In December, 2016, it made some notable changes - specifically, asking authors to pay closer attention to where they publish, in order to avoid so-called “predatory” journals, and encouraging more authors to consider “retracting and replacing” a paper with an updated version when the problems stem from honest error (something more journals have been embracing). We spoke with Darren Taichman, Executive Deputy Editor of the Annals of Internal Medicine and Secretary of the ICMJE, about the changes.



Darren Taichman

Retraction Watch: The first set of recommendations was issued in 1978 — how have they evolved, generally speaking, since then?

Darren Taichman: The first set of recommendations (then called the “Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals,” or “URMs”)

B I'd also like to note that, like any other member of the ICMJE, I represent my own journal, the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, on the committee. ICMJE does not have an official spokesperson - our website contains our official statements in editorials and our Recommendations document. So, while I serve as the group's secretary, what I've said here are my thoughts and others on the committee might see or state things somewhat differently.

C Established in 1927 by the American College of Physicians (ACP), *Annals of Internal Medicine* is the premier internal medicine journal. *Annals of Internal Medicine*'s mission is to promote excellence in medicine, enable physicians and other health care professionals to be well informed members of the medical community and society, advance standards in the conduct and reporting of medical research, and contribute to improving the health of people worldwide. To achieve this mission, the journal publishes a wide variety of original research, review articles, practice guidelines, and commentary relevant to clinical practice, health care delivery, public health, health care policy, medical education, ethics, and research methodology. In addition, the journal publishes personal narratives that convey the feeling and the art of medicine.

Annals of Internal Medicine has a large readership that includes the 148,000 members of the American College of Physicians and many more physicians and researchers worldwide who read the journal via institutional subscriptions. The most recent (2015) Impact Factor for *Annals of Internal Medicine* is 16.593—the highest of any specialty journal in the Thomson Reuters' General and Internal Medicine category. The Impact Factor is a measurement of the frequency with which the “average article” has been cited. *Annals* is ranked 5th among 151 general medicine journals. It is one of the most highly cited and influential journals in the world. Material published in *Annals* is subject to peer review and the journal greatly appreciates the efforts of the over 18,000 volunteers in our reviewer database who provide critical input into our peer review process. Acceptance rates for original research range from 6-8% in recent years. *Annals of Internal Medicine* publishes new issues twice a month on the first and third Tuesday of each month. Online-first articles are generally released on other Tuesdays.

Fig. 8. Surprising Revelations

Notes: Fig. 8 (A) In an interview given to Retraction Watch, a science watchdog, Darren B. Taichman, who is the Executive Deputy Editor of the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (AIM), it is also revealed that he is the ICMJE secretary, a fact that cannot be gleaned from any ICMJE web-page. (B) In the same interview with Retraction Watch, Taichman indicates that different ICMJE members might use, or interpret, the ICMJE Recommendations differently, in essence, annulling their importance and effectiveness. (C) AIM boasts to be one of the world's best and most prominent medical journals. Sources: Retraction Watch, 2017 (A, B); AIM, 2017c (C).

If true, it is not clear for how many years Taichman has been the ICMJE secretary and for how many more years he will hold this position. On the same Retraction Watch page, Taichman makes quite a startling – but insightful – revelation, apart from the fact that he is the *de facto* 2017 ICMJE secretary (unless of course, the Retraction Watch page is factually incorrect) (Fig. 8B): “I'd also like to note that, like any other member of the ICMJE, I represent my own journal, the

Annals of Internal Medicine, on the committee. ICMJE does not have an official spokesperson – our website contains our official statements in editorials and our Recommendations document. So, while I serve as the group’s secretary, what I’ve said here are my thoughts and others on the committee might see or state things somewhat differently.” That statement leaves open a whole set of interpretations: a) that the ICMJE has no leadership, or that it does not wish to disclose that leadership publicly; b) that there are inconsistencies among ICMJE members, thus annulling or weakening the validity, in essence, of the ICMJE recommendations and the collective ethical strength of this organization; c) Taichman refers to *AIM* as “his” journal, suggesting that ICMJE members are in fact specific journals, and not publishers, as was already suggested above, although the precise representatives of each ICMJE member is unclear, as is their position or title.

ICMJE: Key Conclusions and Concerns

From this analysis, five main or key conclusions can be drawn about the ICMJE:

- 1) The ICMJE cannot gain trust when the list of purported journals adopting the ICMJE recommendations is potentially inaccurate, incomplete, or even dishonest or false.
- 2) The ICMJE claims that it is “not an open membership organization”, but then, within the same clause, states that it opens two exceptions, to WAME and to the CSE. Making exceptions to the rule within an ethical organization can be construed as being unethical, or an act of cronyism.
- 3) The ICMJE secretary, Dr. Darren B. Taichman, did not respond readily to my queries, and it is unclear if this is a policy in place towards the wider academic public. This relative silence may undermine trust in this organization because open communication with members of global academia and the public are essential aspects of an open and transparent organization, even if the queries are critical. Dr. Taichman’s and the ICMJE’s lack of transparency also undermines this organization’s accountability. The ethical bedrock of this organization is thus questionable
- 4) ICMJE membership lists are inaccurate and inconsistent. When different versions of the most basic information about an organization exist, i.e., “alternative facts”, then there is reason for concern. The precise leadership positions and the portfolio of specific individuals within the ICMJE cannot be identified on the ICMJE website. How is the biomedical community expected to trust, and respect, the ICMJE recommendations, when information about their own leadership structure and membership sits on highly opaque ground?
- 5) Misleading information and opacity may pose serious risks to the biomedical community, and to society.

Despite all of the clues that were discovered about this organization’s past structure, no clear organogram exists on the ICMJE website describing the current leadership or their exact positions, including the precise position of Mulrow, Taichman and Laine. The opacity about the leadership structure of this ethical organization is deeply troubling and of great immediate concern and risk to the biomedical community because the ICMJE and several of its members are deeply entrenched within the editor boards of several leading ethics and biomedical journals of some top for-profit publishers, and because several ethics organizations are so intrinsically interlinked, including the ICMJE, CSE, COPE and WAME, as are their leadership figures (as will be discussed in detail elsewhere). The ethical integrity of the ICMJE is thus questioned, as is that of *AIM*, which describes itself, boastfully, as “the premier internal medicine journal” with a JCR journal impact factor of 16.593 ([AIM, 2017c](#); Fig. 8C). The issue of editorial opacity, lack of integrity and then possibly issues, such as hidden COIs, with papers published in *AIM*, which is an ICMJE member, may be highlighted on a whistle-blower website, PubPeer, as has occurred with the January 2016 critique of an editorial published in *AIM* ([PubPeer, 2016](#)).

The global biomedical community is faced with an astonishing amount of threats and risks, challenges and concerns, which have added exponentially to academics’ stresses and responsibilities. Academics seek guidance from leadership that is honest, modest, open and transparent, frank and courteous, communicative and open to dialogue and receptive to new ideas and suggestions. It is the experience of the author of this paper that few of these characteristics have been displayed, in particular when dealing with the issues described in this paper. The ICMJE, like a handful of other ethics organizations around the world, has an extremely high responsibility towards its public image, and that image must be impeccable. This is also because the ICMJE and the ACP / *AIM* are deeply involved in socio-political issues, including the influence on policies at the highest political levels within the USA ([AIM, 2017d](#); [AIM, 2017e](#); Fig. 9A, 9B),

and must thus be seen as being fully open and honest, accountable and transparent. As it currently stands, this is not the case. This paper serves a vote of no confidence regarding the ICMJE and thus its recommendations which are being imposed upon the global biomedical community.



Fig. 9. Socio-Political Involvement of ICMJE and the ACP/AIM

Notes: Fig. 9 the *Annals of Internal Medicine (AIM)*, published by the American College of Physicians (ACP), is deeply involved in state of health, society and politics in the USA. (A) A personalized response published in AIM in response to President Donald J. Trump's attempted ban on individuals arriving from 7 predominantly Muslim countries. (B) The ACP is very interested in moderating White House policies related to health care reform, specifically the American Health Care Act, likely seeking to influence health care policies. Sources: AIM, 2017d, 2017e (bottom, right inset) (A); ACP, 2017 (B).

ICMJE Formal Response

After contacting Taichman and/or Laine for the third time, a formal response was finally received on March 16, 2017, as indicated next, verbatim. Although one or two minor aspects of the concerns expressed in this article about the ICMJE were resolved, the vast majority were not, fortifying thus, the concerns. The email received was:

"Dear Dr. Silva,

1. As is indicated at our website where journals who have indicated following the ICMJE Recommendations are listed:

"The following is a list of journals whose editors or publishers have contacted the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) to request listing as a journal that follows the ICMJE's Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals.

- The ICMJE cannot verify the completeness or accuracy of this list.
- There may be some journals that follow the ICMJE recommendations, but have never

requested listing.

- There may be some listed journals that do not follow all of the many recommendations and policies in the document. "

2. As is indicated at our website, contacting the ICMJE is done through <http://www.icmje.org/about-icmje/contact-icmje/>

3. The ICMJE purposefully does not have a hierarchical structure or officer positions with the exception of a secretary, who has an administrative role.

4. The Annals has served as the secretariat for the ICMJE, and thus hosts the ICMJE website ([icmje.org](http://www.icmje.org)) at the server of its publisher, the ACP. The ACP has no other role in the ICMJE.

5. Queries are to be addressed through the ICMJE's contact box, as noted above in #2.

Thanks for your interest in ICMJE.

Darren Taichman, MD, PhD"

In a bid to expand the public discussion among academics, an open question was posed at ResearchGate ([ResearchGate, 2017](#)). Screenshots taken of publicly available websites, including those of the ICMJE, are under fair-use ([Copyright.gov, 2017](#)).

Conflicts of Interest

In 2011-2012, the author challenged the ethics of the ICMJE's multiple copies of the URMs published on PubMed in the mid to late 2000s by the ICMJE, without ever receiving any suitable explanation. The author believes that his challenge to the ethics of these multiple copies led to the change in name from URMs to ICMJE recommendations.

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