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Editorial

Governance of AI Writing Tools: A New Priority for Medical Journals

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Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) - large language models (LLMs) and related tools- has rapidly moved from novelty to ubiquity in academic writing. In less than three years these systems have begun to assist manuscript drafting, editing, literature summarisation and even figure generation. Their speed and fluency promise to lower barriers to publication, improve clarity for non-native English speakers, and accelerate dissemination. At the same time, unchecked use of these tools threatens core principles of scholarly communication: accountability, accuracy, reproducibility and trust. Medical journals now stand at a crossroads: adopt and govern AI to preserve integrity and accessibility, or risk erosion of the scientific record by inconsistent, opaque practices.[1-5]

Opportunities and Benefits of AI-Assisted Writing

AI writing tools can be powerful amplifiers of human work. They help convert dense methods and results into readable prose, assist with literature searches and reference formatting, and create accessible patient-facing summaries. For authors with limited language skills, judicious use of an LLM can improve clarity and inclusiveness, supporting equitable participation in global scholarship.[6,7] For editors and reviewers, AI can speed triage and identify obvious omissions or reporting inconsistencies-freeing human expertise for higher-value judgements.[3-5]

Risks and Ethical Concerns in AI-Generated Text

But the benefits come with real harms. LLMs are prone to "hallucinations": confidently stated but fabricated facts, references, or erroneous interpretations that can easily slip into drafts and then into the literature if not caught. AI can inadvertently paraphrase or reproduce prior work without adequate attribution, creating subtle forms of plagiarism. Perhaps most importantly, AI cannot be held responsible: it cannot take accountability for study design, data integrity, or the ethical implications of claims. International bodies therefore emphasise that AI cannot and must not be listed as an author — authorship implies responsibility and the ability to respond to critique, which only humans

can provide.[1,2,5,8]

Evolving Editorial and Publisher Policies

The publishing ecosystem has moved quickly. The ICMJE and major publisher groups now require disclosure of AI use and explicitly state that AI tools do not meet authorship criteria.[1-5] COPE and several journal families echo this position, and many large publishers (Elsevier, Springer Nature, Wiley, BMJ, JAMA Network and others) have published templates and policies asking authors to declare the tool used, the version, and the nature of its role — for example, whether it was used for language editing, data analysis assistance, or substantive drafting — and to place that disclosure in the manuscript (typically in the Methods or Acknowledgements).[1-7] Surveys and audits show that by 2024–2025 most leading journals had instituted such rules, though the detail and enforcement vary widely.[3,4]

Practical Challenges for Editors and Reviewers

Transparency requirements are necessary but not sufficient. Three practical problems confront editors:

- Detection is imperfect. AI-detection tools can flag probable machine text but have substantial false positives/negatives and are easily evaded by paraphrasing or human post-editing. Reliance on detection alone risks both over-enforcement and false reassurance.
- Disclosure quality varies. A simple sentence like "We used ChatGPT to edit language", is inadequate if AI materially shaped interpretation or created synthetic citations. Consistent standards for what to disclose (tool name and version, prompt examples, percentage of text created) are still evolving.[3-6]
- Peer review confidentiality and workflows. Allowing peer reviewers to use LLMs to help summarise or critique a manuscript raises confidentiality concerns because many LLMs retain user inputs for model training unless explicitly configured otherwise. Editorial offices must decide whether and how reviewers may use such tools and require disclosure.[5]

A Policy Roadmap for Responsible AI Use in Journals

Medical journals should adopt a principled, pragmatic approach that preserves scientific values while recognising the legitimate, helpful uses of AI.

- Clear, mandatory disclosure policy. Require all authors to declare any use of generative AI in the preparation of the manuscript, specifying the tool, version, a concise statement of what it produced (e.g., "language editing only" vs "drafted Background and Discussion"), and the prompts or templates used when feasible. Place this statement in a standard location (Acknowledgements or a dedicated declaration) and require a corresponding line in submission forms. This is consistent with ICMJE and major publisher recommendations.[1,5,6]
- Reinforce human accountability. Make explicit that authors retain full responsibility for all content, including AI-generated text or figures, and that AI is not an author. This should be reiterated in authorship forms and signed declarations.[1,2]
- Specify acceptable uses and forbidden practices. For example, permit AI for language polishing and literature discovery (with verification) but prohibit undeclared use for data analysis, generation of novel results, or fabrication of references. If AI-generated images are used, require methods-level documentation, including seed data and code, or ban such images unless integral to the research design.[6,7]
- Protect confidentiality in peer review. Prohibit reviewers from pasting confidential manuscript text into third-party LLMs that retain data unless the reviewer uses an institutional, privacy-guaranteed service that explicitly disables data retention. Require reviewers to disclose any AI assistance and to remain accountable for their reviews.[5]
- Strengthen editorial checks without over-relying on detectors. Use AI-detectors as one triage tool but depend on human expertise for substantive verification: sanity-checking citations, confirming raw data availability and reproducibility statements, and querying unexpected claims. Encourage or require authors to supply machine-readable data and code that allow editors and reviewers to validate key analyses.
- Educate authors and reviewers. Offer concise guidance and examples of acceptable disclosures, common pitfalls (hallucinated citations), and prompt-management best practices. Run short online modules or checklists for editors, reviewers and authors to reduce inadvertent misuse.
- Foster interoperability and reporting standards. Work with COPE, ICMJE and publisher consortia to create minimal reporting standards (akin to CONSORT or STROBE) for AI use in manuscript preparation: what to report, how to report prompts, and how to document validation steps. Shared standards reduce confusion and the enforcement burden across journals.[2-3]
- Be ready to iterate. AI models and business practices evolve rapidly. Policies should be reviewed and updated regularly, and journals should transparently publish policy changes and rationales so authors can adapt.[6-7]

Equity, Access, and Global Implications

Policy must balance integrity with equity. Banning all AI use would disadvantage non-native English speakers and resource-limited researchers who derive legitimate benefit from language tools. Conversely, lax rules risk advantaging

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those who can purchase sophisticated, private LLMs or who have teams that can mask AI provenance. Thoughtful policy permitting declared language assistance and encouraging verification while forbidding undisclosed substantive generation is the ethical middle path that preserves both quality and inclusiveness.[3,4,6]

Conclusion

Generative AI is not a passing fad; it will alter how manuscripts are drafted, reviewed and edited. Medical journals must lead by setting transparent, enforceable policies that preserve authorship responsibility and scientific accuracy while harnessing AI's productivity gains. The immediate tasks are straightforward: mandatory disclosure, explicit denial of AI authorship, reviewer confidentiality protections, and education for the community. Beyond these essentials lies a larger project, the development of shared reporting standards and technical workflows that let journals and readers judge what in a paper is human, what is machine-assisted, and how the two were combined. If journals get this right, AI will become a tool that amplifies human scholarship without undermining the accountability that is the bedrock of medical science.

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