What are the mission and responsibilities of the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) Ethics Committee?

Scientific societies exist for many purposes, one of which is to establish policies and guidelines for responsible conduct within the field they represent. SfN has established several such policies. They spring from a conviction that the success of the scientific enterprise demands high standards in ethical conduct, scientific rigor, and data reliability. The integrity of the scientific mission is a collective responsibility, and SfN has a special obligation with respect to those activities for which it is directly responsible, including its annual meeting and its journals. The professional conduct statements of the Society include its Ethics Policy, Guidelines for Responsible Conduct Regarding Scientific Communication, and Procedures for Dealing with Allegations of Unethical Scientific Conduct. The Ethics Committee oversees and administers these policies and procedures as they relate to SfN scientific forums, evaluating cases and administering sanctions as appropriate. Editorial decisions by SfN journals are determined by their editorial boards, and may be informed by Ethics Committee determinations.

The committee charge and composition are publicly available.

Who may bring forward a case and what kind of cases are accepted for review?

Any reader, reviewer or author of a scientific communication may bring a potential case to the Ethics Committee (ethics@sfn.org), and he or she will receive acknowledgement of their communication. The option of anonymity is provided and rigorously protected—the source is only known to the Committee Chair and any intermediaries who may have transmitted the case. The identity and position of the source play no role in the committee’s deliberations.

The committee undertakes cases that relate to content in SfN publications, journals, and the annual meeting—including abstracts, manuscripts, or published articles—and will research each thoroughly. Concerns involving ethical violations, committed by either editors or reviewers, which may occur during the review process are also handled by the Ethics Committee. Concerns regarding communications with other societies or journals should be raised with those entities, with the caveat that the Ethics Committee may advocate for authors whose work has been plagiarized in other journals. Authorship disputes are not evaluated by the Ethics Committee; authors are encouraged to settle these themselves or seek appropriate review by a committee at the institution(s) where work was performed.

What if a manuscript is the subject of an inquiry?

Manuscripts will be placed on hold pending a final determination. Authors are not permitted to withdraw manuscripts while an inquiry is underway.

When and why does the Ethics Committee contact authors of disputed works?

Based on the outcome of an initial case review, the Ethics Committee will contact the authors of any work that may violate SfN ethics policies. At that time, the committee is evaluating an allegation, which it has found cannot be immediately dismissed. The goal is to provide authors a full and fair opportunity to respond. Authors are asked to address the apparent issues and provide original and unmodified data to support their work. Clear and thorough author responses and
supporting data facilitate a comprehensive, fair and timely review. Repeated requests for information may delay the inquiry process.

This is the best time for authors to address the potential violation, either substantiating the original work, or acknowledging mistakes and/or inconsistencies. At this time, authors may also inform the committee of any circumstances they feel may be relevant to the case, and explain how the issues emerged and what they view as the role of various co-authors.

**What information is pertinent in a case involving a scientific communication?**

The committee’s sole focus is to determine whether a scientific communication contains errors pertaining to data or plagiarism, and to assess the severity of those errors. Ideally, authors respond to an Ethics Committee inquiry by providing raw data such as original uncut gels, photomicrographs, and original traces. Copies of manuscript drafts and lab notebook entries may also be submitted.

Violations may or may not involve any intent to mislead. This point is critical to understand but is unfortunately frequently unappreciated. At this point in a case, the Ethics Committee considers the integrity of the scientific literature and mission as its sole concern. The consequences of ethical violations must be corrected or removed from the scientific record. In this regard, intent is not a factor in determining whether a violation has occurred. Moreover, in the case of an article, the existence of citations or published confirmations of the findings are similarly irrelevant to an Ethics Committee investigation. Thus, the apparent validity of scientific findings is not a factor in determining whether a violation has occurred.

The Ethics Committee does not consider differences in scientific opinion or data interpretation. Open discourse around honest differences in opinion is a sign of a scientific community's vibrancy and is not considered to be an ethical issue.

**What roles do corresponding and co-authors play in responding to an inquiry?**

As the corresponding author is ultimately accountable for a submitted manuscript or published article, she or he is the primary correspondent with the Ethics Committee, although the committee will copy all co-authors. Consistent with the SfN Ethics Policy, co-authors share both credit and responsibility for scientific communications. A co-author may elect to communicate with the committee, privately or as part of the full author panel, but is not required to do so.

**What is the next step after an author responds?**

Following the corresponding author’s response, the committee will evaluate and discuss all materials thoroughly, including the allegations, author responses, and primary data. This may take some time. When the committee reaches a conclusion, authors will be informed of the committee decision.

If a scientific communication is deemed to contain minor errors that do not misrepresent the data, the case may be closed, with or without a recommendation for corrective action, and the authors will be informed of this result. If there is a conclusion that a scientific communication contains
errors that are significant or numerous, the committee will typically request an institutional inquiry. The Research Integrity Officer or equivalent at the institution(s) where the work was conducted will be contacted by the Ethics Committee and informed of the case history, and be requested to complete an inquiry. Authors are informed when this occurs.

During this period, authors may be subject to temporary sanctions, pending resolution (see sanctions description, below). The temporary sanctions hold until the case is resolved or the temporary sanctions are transformed into time-delimited sanctions based on a determination of an ethics violation.

**What process and outcome does the Ethics Committee seek from an institutional inquiry?**

The process of an institutional inquiry is the purview of the institution. SfN believes a high-quality institutional review should include an independent examination of the relevant material involved (such as manuscript drafts, original uncut gels, original recordings, and lab notebooks) and interviews with all persons involved. SfN believes an effective institutional inquiry: 1) employs a panel that includes individuals with a broad range of expertise and who are free of potential institutional conflict of interest; 2) details the evidence examined; 3) provides a factual assessment of the allegations; 4) reaches an initial conclusion as to the credibility of the allegations; and 5) evaluates responsible parties.

Institutional reports that provide evidence serve authors better. A final determination by the Ethics Committee may or may not align with the conclusions or recommendations in an institutional report. As intent to mislead (or lack of intent to mislead) is not a factor in SfN decision-making, institutional opinions about intent are not determinative.

**What happens if, in the course of its inquiry, the Ethics Committee finds possible violations in non-SfN publications or abstracts?**

The integrity of the scientific mission is a collective responsibility. The Ethics Committee may contact other journals or societies to inform them of concerns.

**What are the consequences of an ethical violation?**

One goal of the SfN Ethics process is to ensure the scientific literature is correct and enduring, even as it is debated and advanced through further research. In the case of a manuscript, the Ethics Committee will inform the appropriate editor-in-chief and recommend the manuscript be corrected or rejected. With a published article, it may recommend that the article be corrected or retracted. With an abstract, it may recommend to the Program Committee chair that an abstract be corrected or retracted. Final decisions about the handling of published articles or abstracts are made by the appropriate Editor-in-Chief or Program Committee chair.

The Ethics Committee may impose sanctions on those held responsible, for a period to be determined. Sanctions always involve education and may include a ban on any scientific communication (abstract, *The Journal of Neuroscience*, eNeuro), prohibition of scientific communication as either corresponding or co-author, and ineligibility for editorial service. Sanctions
are held in confidence by SfN, and communicated only to the individual sanctioned and the relevant officials at the authors’ institution. They are not made public by the Ethics Committee.

Can an author appeal sanctions?

Sanctioned individuals have 30 days to appeal imposed sanctions. These appeals are made to the SfN Executive Committee, via the SfN staff, and will be considered at their next meeting. There is no overlap in the membership of the Ethics and Executive Committees.

What is the process for SfN sanctions, and how and when are they lifted?

Sanctions are imposed on all authors of a paper found to violate standards, regardless of perceived or true intent or degree of accountability. Individuals may be directly responsible by commission (authors who contributed data and data analysis, reviewers, editors), indirectly responsible by omission (typically senior author), or formally responsible through authorship (typically middle authors). As noted above, sanctions prohibit all scientific communication with the Society, including submission of papers to *The Journal of Neuroscience*, *eNeuro* and abstracts to the SfN annual meeting, as well as an inability to serve in volunteer capacities on editorial boards or SfN governance bodies.

The sanction process and remedies are as follows:

- **Affected authors will be required to review the SfN Guidelines for Responsible Conduct Regarding Scientific Communications and submit a signed statement to ethics@sfn.org that they have done so. At this time, individuals who are not directly or indirectly responsible will be removed from sanctioned status and receive notification of this change. They return to full capacity to participate in the Society’s scientific and volunteer activities.**

- **Those individuals responsible directly (typically first author/s; reviewers; editors) or indirectly (typically senior author) will be required to write a plan detailing their role in the violation and how issues will be prevented in the future. Individuals may discuss their plans but each individual is required to write his or her own plan. Plans must be submitted to the Ethics Committee and will be reviewed and approved, possibly after revisions.**

- **All sanctioned individuals will be prohibited from submitting or being an author on manuscripts to *The Journal of Neuroscience*, *eNeuro*, abstracts to the SfN annual meeting, and any other form of scientific communication with SfN for a period to be specified, typically 1 year from the initial imposition (often the date that temporary sanctions were imposed) of sanctions. Egregious or repeat cases may warrant longer sanction periods.**

- **Sanctions will be lifted only after the plan (above) is accepted by the Ethics Committee or when the defined sanction period has elapsed, whichever happens last.**

- **Any deviation from the above process, including any sanctions of more than 1 year, will be reported by the Ethics Committee chair to the Executive Committee and to Council.**