

VIEWPOINT OPEN ACCESS

Guidelines Against Discrimination and Bias in Anatomical Research Papers (GDBARP): Recommendations From Anatomical Journal Editors

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ABSTRACT

Most discussions about discrimination and bias in anatomical research papers have been limited to terminology relating to race/ethnicity and gender/sex. However, as editors of anatomical journals, the authors of this article have frequently observed broader instances of potential discrimination and bias within anatomical research. These often stem from differences among authors' backgrounds, traditions, cultures, religions, provenance/origins, and workplace affiliations. In view of the limited discourse on this topic, we seek in this article to establish a consensus among editors of anatomical journals and to propose new Guidelines Against Discrimination and Bias in Anatomical Research Papers (GDBARP). We have identified multiple factors that can contribute to discrimination and bias, underscoring the need for greater awareness and proactive measures. It is imperative in anatomical research to respect authors, reviewers, and editors regardless of their background, culture, traditions, sex, ethnicity, language, religion, or ethical perspectives.

[Correction added on 10 October 2025, after first online publication: The copyright line was changed.]

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1 | Introduction

“Discrimination” refers to treating a person or group of people differently from others, especially in a worse way, because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc. (Cambridge Dictionary 2024). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have identified ten types of discrimination: age, disability, sexual orientation, status as a parent, religion, national origin, pregnancy, sexual harassment, race/color/sex, and reprisal/retaliation (CDC 2024). Specific forms of discrimination have been extensively discussed, including those linked to mental health (Thornicroft et al. 2022), race (Lang and Spitzer 2020), and the US healthcare system (Nong et al. 2020). However, an anatomical research paper can exhibit any of these types of discrimination, or others.

“Bias” means supporting or opposing a particular person or thing unfairly because one's judgment has been influenced by opinions (Cambridge Dictionary 2024). The ethical guidelines for peer reviewers published by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) state that a peer reviewer is expected to provide an “unbiased review” (COPE 2025a).

Anatomy involves distinctive ethical considerations that distinguish it from other academic disciplines. Chief among these is the “concept of death,” which differs among countries and regions. Owing to this distinctiveness, many researchers in the anatomical sciences feel unease or discomfort when their field is treated in the same way as other disciplines. For example, requests such as “please increase the number of samples (donors) for revision” can feel unnatural or inappropriate, given the ethical complexities surrounding anatomical research.

Because of its distinctive nature, anatomical science is potentially more vulnerable to discrimination and bias than other academic disciplines. This disparity has long been overlooked, so there is a need to increase awareness and discussion among experts.

While discussions about discrimination and bias in anatomical research papers have focused primarily on terminology related to race/ethnicity and gender/sex, other forms of bias have remained underexplored. As editors of anatomical journals, the authors of this article have frequently observed instances of discrimination and bias unrelated to such terminology. These often arise from differences in authors' backgrounds, traditions, cultures, provenance, and religions. Recognizing these concerns, our aim in this article is to establish a consensus among editors of various anatomical journals and to propose Guidelines Against Discrimination and Bias in Anatomical Research Papers (GDBARP) to address and mitigate such biases in anatomical research.

2 | Potential Discrimination

The following are some of the potential sources of discrimination in anatomy research papers.

2.1 | Donor Use for Education Before Research and Availability of Donors

In many facilities, the donors used in anatomical research have previously been used in anatomy education. Therefore, readers of anatomical research articles need to understand that human anatomical studies differ from other types of basic research in which undamaged animal specimens are used. This also means that fewer donors could be available for research each year than are used for education. Some reviewers ask authors to increase the number of donors, which in some cases is impossible within a year. This is considered an epistemic injustice, a type of discrimination (Fricker 2007).

2.2 | Race/Ethnicity/Country and Sex/Age in the Title

Authors are occasionally asked to add “race/ethnicity/country” and “sex/age (such as elderly male donors)” to the title of the article, which could potentially introduce discrimination against the origins of the donors. Such information should be included in the materials and methods section, if at all; depending on the aim of the study, its inclusion in the title could be redundant. If the title reveals the regional source of the donors, some readers are likely to abandon the paper before they read the main text. According to the definition, “Treating a person or group of people differently from others, especially in a worse way, because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc.” is discrimination (Cambridge Dictionary 2024). On the other hand, we should be cautious about this because including “race/ethnicity/country” and “sex/age” in the title is likely to be appropriate if the article describes health disparities, genetic and pharmacological data, public health and epidemiological data, sociocultural and behavioral factors, health policy and access to care, occupational and environmental exposure, social and psychological aspects of health, etc. specific to a particular population (Flanagin et al. 2021; ICMJE 2025).

2.3 | Religious and Cultural Tolerance

Donors can be treated differently in different cultures, under different religions, and even among various schools/individuals. However, any person/group should respect the donors and their wishes. In many countries, human donors can only be accessed via universities/medical/dental schools. In some, donors are cremated and the ashes sent to their families; in contrast, some customs/religions do not allow cremation as their views of life and death are incompatible with the practice. In some religions and cultures, people believe that the dead can be more honored than the living, or there could be a limitation on using a particular part of the body (Avdiushenkova 2023). However, the recent death and body donation of a religious leader in Thailand affected the trend in body donation and increased donor registration at Khon Kaen University 1.5-fold (Chaiyamon et al. 2024). This is another interesting illustration of how a religion-related/culture-related event can influence the number of available donors.

2.4 | Language Discrimination in Reference Lists

Currently, English is the standard language of scientific and anatomical literature. However, there are many anatomical writings in other languages, including non-alphabet languages such as Japanese, Thai, Korean, and Chinese (Iwanaga and Tubbs 2025). Articles and books in non-English but Romanized alphabet languages (German, French, Italian, Spanish, etc.) are often cited and appear in reference lists (in their language), but this is not the case for non-alphabet languages. Even if references in non-alphabet languages are mentioned in the manuscript, they appear primarily as English-translated titles, which could be slightly different in meaning from the original titles. Failure to cite articles in non-alphabet languages could mean that previously published knowledge is ignored. This is also considered an epistemic injustice. AI and translation resources can help authors cite non-alphabet language articles. This should be discussed among scientific researchers whose primary languages include both alphabetic and non-alphabetic languages.

2.5 | Sex Ratio in the Number of Donors Used in the Study

Researchers should try to balance the sexes in their samples whenever possible. However, in some religions or countries, it could be challenging to access donors of a particular sex. Therefore, when readers, including editors and reviewers, see biased sex ratios, they must recognize that restrictions could be operating. According to the CDC list, this could indicate religious or national origin discrimination.

The following are potential sources of bias from the editor/reviewer or the authors of an article:

3 | Potential Bias

3.1 | Institutional Review Board Approval for Cadaveric Studies

Recently, many organizations have required Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval even for cadaveric studies because they consider the donors to be “human subjects.” In Poland, consent of the local bioethics committee is required for all research conducted on donors. In the United Kingdom, informed consent is the cornerstone of the Human Tissue Act (2004), the legal framework governing body donations. However, in the United States, US Code of Federal Regulation 21 CFR 50.3 (g) defines a human subject as follows:

A human subject is an individual who is or becomes a participant in research, either as a recipient of the test article or as a control. A subject may be either a healthy human or a patient.

Thus, a human cadaver is NOT considered a human subject under US Federal Regulations.

In Germany, the body donor bequeaths their mortal remains legally to an Institute of Anatomy by signing a “last will and

testament” “for the purposes of research, teaching, and further education.” The type of scientific research conducted on the body donor remains undetermined, just as it is during the donor's lifetime when they sign the testamentary disposition. At that time, it is unclear whether the body will be used for dissection courses, further education, or scientific research after death and transfer to the Institute of Anatomy. However, there are clear guidelines in this context (German Medical Association 2005; Lippert 2012). According to Pabst et al. (2014), since German body donors explicitly make themselves available for research and teaching, no approval by an ethics committee is required, as it is for comparable collections in pathology or forensic medicine (Pabst et al. 2014). The COPE guidelines for editors suggest that editors should clarify regulations and local laws with the authors (COPE 2025b). Given the foregoing, differences among regulations for anatomy research that use human cadavers need to be understood and accepted.

3.2 | Clinical Affiliations/Backgrounds of Authors/Contributors

The authors of anatomy research articles using donors are generally affiliated with a department of anatomy or an equivalent entity. When clinical applications are discussed in the article, that discussion should originate from the clinical viewpoints of those who contribute to patient care. Anatomy research papers that discuss clinical applications often lack authors or contributors from clinical and surgical departments or those with clinical backgrounds; after publication, this can be known from the degree stated, if available. This needs to be taken into consideration. Many scientific journals currently use single or double-blinded peer review processes, so the reviewers do not know the authors' backgrounds. The authors should try to recruit contributors with clinical backgrounds when their article discusses clinical relevance, as a clinical hypothesis generated only by anatomists could stray too far from reality.

3.3 | Biased Guidelines in Anatomy

In general, guidelines should be agreed among diverse people from different relevant specialties (Henry et al. 2018; Iwanaga et al. 2021; Iwanaga et al. 2022; Iwanaga et al. 2025; Iwanaga, Kikuchi, et al. 2024; Ljungberg et al. 2015; Tomaszewski et al. 2017). Guidelines should also describe the strength and nature of the consensus or agreement among the group proposing them (Brouwers et al. 2010; Field and Lohr 1990; Guyatt et al. 2008). Although most guidelines and consensus in anatomy have been published after an agreement, some have been published without agreement among the relevant range of people. Articles on guidelines/consensus in anatomy must be established by experts from different countries and regions because there is no single accepted ‘concept of death.’

3.4 | Discoveries and Myths in Anatomy Arising From Bias Before Dissection

In recent decades, several ligaments have been revisited in the plastic and orthopedic surgery fields. One is the

anterolateral ligament (ALL), which is still controversial (Roessler et al. 2017). Although an 80%–100% prevalence of the ALL is reported in most cadaveric studies (Sheean et al. 2018), the evidence that it is a real entity is still insufficient. As previously discussed, no decisive gross anatomical and histological approach evidence has been found to demonstrate its existence (Iwanaga, Kikuchi, et al. 2024). Some surgeons include the ALL in anatomical reconstructions of the ligaments, but others do not because the morphology is still unclear. Some have concluded on the basis of their inside-out dissection that the ALL is a thickening of the capsular ligament (Kennedy et al. 2015). Other structures such as the orbicularis retaining ligaments (ORL) and superficial facial fat compartments are also controversial. They are not distinguishable by the naked eye. Their differentiation depends on the sensations and concepts associated with them, which have typically been illustrated and used (Lee et al. 2024). In addition, anatomical descriptions that have been accepted since the pre-histology or pre-surgical microscope era could be incorrect (Fukino et al. 2024; Iwanaga et al. 2020; Iwanaga, Fukino, et al. 2024; Spinelli et al. 2022). Before submitting accounts of their discoveries, authors need to consult multiple specialties to discuss the validity of their methods and interpretations (Iwanaga, Kikuchi, et al. 2024).

3.5 | Revisiting Forgotten Structures

This is a similar category to “discoveries.” Much anatomical research was conducted during the pre-digital era and can be found in old printed textbooks but not in the online literature. Generally, basic researchers go online to confirm (or otherwise) whether a finding is a discovery. However, some anatomical structures have been forgotten during the long history of the discipline, e.g., Gerber’s ligament (Ishak et al. 2019), Beclard’s triangle of the neck (Tubbs et al. 2011) and the zygomaticomandibularis (Akita and Fukino 2022). If the authors of an anatomy research paper “discover” structures that cannot be found in online databases, they should go to the library to investigate old anatomy textbooks before they submit the article. There could have been a previous description (Kikuchi et al. 2024). We also need to be aware that illustrations in anatomy textbooks can be sex-biased (Parker et al. 2017).

When dealing with macroscopic-anatomical-clinical questions, researchers should be aware that many anatomical structures have been described in old sources (Adachi 1928; Le Double 1897; Testut 1884). Many of these books and journals have now been digitized, but they are almost always in the original languages. Modern translation programs can easily translate articles into alphabetic languages. Although this has rarely been discussed, searching the literature exclusively in alphabet languages (not only English) is inherently biased. It is more challenging to find literature in non-alphabet languages unrelated to Latin. This problem will take time to solve and will need more discussion among experts (Iwanaga and Tubbs 2025). AI technology will undoubtedly help with this.

3.6 | Potential Bias by Reading Sentences Written by Non-English Native Authors/Reviewers

Many scientific journals currently have single-or double-blinded peer review processes, so the authors and reviewers generally do not know each other’s identities. They can probably only be identified by their language in the comments or the main text. In journals that use English as their standard language, some people could be biased by reading comments or main text written by authors or reviewers whose native language is not English.

4 | Recommendations

Fifteen editors of 11 anatomical journals contributed their expertise to these recommendations. The recommendations established by the current editor-in-chief’s authorship, based on the list of potential discriminations in anatomy research papers, include:

1. The recommendation is applied to any research using donor cadavers or donor tissues.
2. The following sentence is included within the Materials and Methods section:

The authors understood the potential for discrimination and bias in this study. They followed the guidelines against discrimination and bias in anatomy research papers (GDBARP) and completed the checklist.

Checklist (Table 1)

Potential discrimination

1. Donor use for education before research and availability of donors
2. Race/ethnicity/country and sex/age in the title
3. Religious and cultural tolerance
4. Language discrimination in reference lists
5. Sex ratio in the number of donors used in the study

Potential bias

6. Institutional Review Board approval for cadaveric studies
7. Clinical affiliations/backgrounds of authors/contributors
8. Biased guidelines in anatomy
9. Discoveries and myths in anatomy arising from bias before dissection
10. Revisiting forgotten structures
11. Potential bias in reading sentences written by non-English native authors/reviewers

TABLE 1 | Checking list for guidelines against discrimination and bias in anatomy research papers.

Check box	Items
1	Do we acknowledge that the number of donors available for anatomical studies is limited?
2	Do we recognize potential discriminations related to origins of donors by showing race, ethnicity, country, sex, and age in the title?
3	Do we understand that religious and cultural beliefs can impact donor availability?
4	Do we respect articles written in non-alphabet-based languages?
5	Do we consider possible restrictions when biased sex ratios are observed?
6	Do we acknowledge that the necessity of IRB approval varies by country and region?
7	Do we recognize that clinicians and anatomists have different yet essential viewpoints for clinical anatomy discussions?
8	Do we verify that the anatomical science guidelines we follow were published through a diverse agreement process?
9	Do we ensure that a “new” discovery is supported by a thorough literature review in multiple languages (both alphabet and non-alphabet based), and do we understand that cadaveric dissection alone does not always confirm the presence of a structure?
10	Do we recognize that online databases may not always include previously described anatomical findings?
11	Do we acknowledge that even blinded peer review may reveal information about the reviewers’ or editors’ backgrounds?

5 | Conclusions

Addressing discrimination and bias in anatomical research is essential for fostering a more inclusive and ethical academic environment. This article has highlighted the distinct challenges faced by anatomical sciences, particularly regarding ethical considerations related to body donation, cultural and religious differences, language barriers, and biases in research methodologies and publication processes. The Guidelines Against Discrimination and Bias in Anatomical Research Papers (GDBARP) aim to mitigate these challenges by promoting fairness, transparency, and respect in anatomical research.

By implementing these guidelines, researchers, reviewers, and editors can ensure that anatomical studies are conducted with greater awareness of potential biases and discrimination, leading to more equitable research practices. Future efforts should focus on continuously refining these guidelines through

interdisciplinary collaboration and ongoing discourse among experts. Fostering an inclusive research environment will enhance the integrity and impact of anatomical sciences, benefiting both the academic community and wider society.

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