

Duplicate publication: What an editor can do?

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Scientific work involves a lot of hard work. In the best interest of society, it should be carried out very meticulously and with full honesty. Relman^[1] proposed the Ingelfinger rule, which states that a manuscript should be considered for publication only if it has not been published previously. Duplicate publication (DP), literally speaking, means a publication in which duplication is partial or full, in the same or a different language. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) defines DP as one whose contents substantially overlap with a previous publication with at least one common author.^[2] If there is no common author and republication is by someone else, then it constitutes plagiarism, copyright violation, or both. Dual, repetitive, fragmented, salami, redundant, and disaggregated publication are other names given to DP.^[3,4]

DP constitutes a scientific misconduct.^[5,6] It is not accidental, rather mostly deliberate, as a result of self-plagiarism or co-submission. Publish or perish is considered to be the reality of academic life.^[7,8] Many authors indulge in the unethical practice of spuriously increasing the number of their publications so as to gain fraudulent academic promotions and research grants and elevate their stature in the academic world. It is often defended by the authors by various excuses. These were enumerated by Tobin in his editorial.^[9] Authors have cited an excuse for co-submission that slowness of editorial processing is so great that if an author waits for the decision of the first publisher, the submission to the second journal may take an undue

long time. Another excuse given is that author wanted to publish in two languages in different journals with separate readership so as to disseminate scientific information to a larger number of readers. It is a grey zone area as publication of the same manuscript in two languages has not been considered unethical by the World Association of Medical Editors, provided it is in the greater interest of the society (www.wame.org/resources/policies).

von Elm *et al.*^[10] have described four different types of DP based on the characteristics of sample group and results of the two overlapping studies. It includes publications with same sample and identical results, same sample but different results, different samples with identical results, and different samples with different results.

In the current electronic era, with the development of advanced softwares, detection of DP has become relatively easier. The problem of DP is of high magnitude.^[11-13] It is evident from the fact that during 2009, as many as 50 retraction notices were issued to articles on the PubMed indexing website (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/>).

DUPLICATE PUBLICATION: THE NUISANCE

DP practice violates academic ethics, is unfair on the part of authors, and tarnishes the image of the journal. All journals at the time of submission of a manuscript ask the authors to vouch that the work is original and has not been published or submitted for consideration to any other journal. The practice of duplicate submission or publication violates the license agreement between the author and the journal.

Journals have limited space and DP will prevent many interesting articles from publication.^[14] It is wastage of time of the editor and reviewers and the resources of the journals. It affects the data because,

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if the results from single randomized controlled trial (RCT) are reported in two articles, they may be entered twice in a meta-analysis, thereby resulting in spurious results.^[15,16] Also, it leads to a wastage of time of the readers, who, after going through the article, would realize that they have not gained any new knowledge.

DEALING WITH DUPLICATE SUBMISSION

All professionals depend on the literature of their discipline for their intellectual development and have faith in its integrity. Journal editors should ensure that whatever literature is published in their journal should be of high quality, ethically sound, and meet the highest standards of scientific integrity. There are several measures that an editor can take to meet these end points.

First, the journal should have clear policies regarding what is expected from the authors, which should be detailed in instructions to the author on the website of the journal. It should be clearly mentioned that stringent action according to standard guidelines is liable if authors do not abide by the ethical publication practice. Authors should be instructed to include a cross-reference to the overlapping work if any in the submitted manuscript. Authors can also upload online all other data submitted, in press, or published, which is potentially overlapping or related to the actual data presented. These instructions are to be regularly updated according to the changes in the policies of the journal. The website of a journal should have links to the sites providing information and guidelines pertaining to scientific misconduct (<http://publicationethics.org/>, <http://www.icmje.org/>). The journal site should also specify regarding the possible actions that will follow in case duplicate submission is detected at any step of the review process. Besides the website, clear instructions are to be published in the journal about submission and what is expected from the authors.

Journal should have guidelines for the reviewers as well. The peer-review process should be very confidential. It is the editors responsibility that an appropriate reviewer is selected who is free from disqualifying competing interests. Further, reviewers should disclose any potential competing interests before agreeing to review a submission. It is the responsibility of reviewers of the manuscript to identify similar work/

publications in their area of interest and be alert to redundant publications and plagiarism. They can make use of modern electronic search systems and electronic databases and run accepted papers through the text similarity search engine eTBLAST, which is freely available online (<http://www.etblast.org>), to hunt for duplications prior to publication. The journal should also provide facility of using a given program to reviewers for checking duplication of the published literature. If the submitted manuscript is found to be duplicate submission by the software, then manual checking should be performed before informing the editor about the same.

The editors should themselves verify the manuscript and gauge the extent of overlap. If overlap is minimal, then the author can be asked for an explanation or correction and advised to abide by the journal policies very strictly. If the overlap is significant, then the submission should be rejected and the author asked for an explanation. In case of a non-satisfactory response, the department chief of the author or the governing body of the trial or the institution can be informed for taking due action against the author. Editors have the full right to reverse decisions to accept submissions in case serious problems are identified with the submission at any step.

The CONSORT, which stands for Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials, statement was first published in 1996 and then revised twice in 2001 and 2007.^[17] The CONSORT statement is an evidence-based, minimum set of recommendations for reporting RCTs. A journal can adopt CONSORT as the minimum standard for the RCTs submitted for publication and that all RCTs should be presented as per CONSORT statement.

DEALING WITH DUPLICATE PUBLICATION

At times, the fraudulent duplicate submission skips the vigilant eyes of the editor and the reviewer and gets a place in the literature. Recognition of duplication after publication is sometimes done by the readers or at times by the authors or editors themselves. In case of a complaint by the reader, prompt reaction is warranted from the editor. First, the editor should himself verify the authenticity of the complaint and the extent of overlap. In case of minimal overlap, discuss publishing correction, giving reference to original paper with the author.

If the overlap is significant, then the editor should withdraw the article promptly so that a minimum number of researchers cite this erroneous work or act on its findings. The same should be informed to the indexing system (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/>). The sole purpose of retraction is correction of the literature and ensuring its integrity. The editor should never refrain from publishing apologies, corrections, clarifications, and retractions when needed, even though they may potentially harm the image of the journal. Few important aspects should be taken care of in the process of retraction of the duplicate article, like clear mention of who (editor/author/publisher) is retracting the article and the basis of retraction. Retraction should be freely available to all readers (subscribers as well as non-subscribers) and applied to all electronic versions (the journal website and bibliographic databases) of the fraudulent publication. Cases of misconduct should be distinguished from those of honest errors. In this process, potentially defamatory statements should be avoided. The retracted article should not be deleted from the electronic version; instead, it should be highlighted as retracted material.

In case DP is a result of co-submission, the journal which got the license to publish or copyright transfer agreement first is entitled to retain the same and the second journal should retract the article. The editor should also ask the author for an explanation and, in case of a non-satisfactory response, inform the employers. The journals should have a clear and stringent policy regarding the magnitude of penalty to be imposed on the culprit author. The penalty could be in various forms, like information to the other journals, seniors, or employers of the author or banning from future publications for a limited or indefinite time period. Also, warning regarding future misconduct should be issued.^[18]

Complex cases of disputes between the editor and the author can be referred to regulatory bodies. The COPE (Committee on Medical Ethics) is one such statutory body based in United Kingdom and has many journals as its members worldwide (publicationethics.org). It was established in 1997 and is concerned with the integrity of peer-reviewed publications in science, particularly biomedicine. If the journal/editor is a member of COPE, then complex cases can be referred to this body for investigation. The USA office of research integrity (ori.dhhs.gov) is another such body. In India also there should be some central body comprising of

senior and experienced members (editors of various journals) from different specialties to look after such matters.

In an interview survey performed to find the views of the authors and editors on issues related to DP, both editors and authors had consensus that the author should be informed about the duplicity (100% vs. 98%, respectively) and the other journal should also be informed (93% vs. 80%, respectively).^[10] Editors were in favor of more severe penalties, like restrictions on future publications (68% vs. 39%, respectively) and informing the author's institute (66% vs. 42%, respectively).^[19]

Garner and his team designed a computer program, eTBLAST, which could detect similarities in published abstracts. With the support of the Office of Research Integrity and the National Institutes of Health, Garner launched a publically available online database, Déjà vu (<http://spore.swmed.edu/dejavu>), which lists all the publications found to be duplicate using the text similarity search engine, engines such as eTBLAST.^[20] This software and database can provide a good means to identify highly similar citations, but this system is not fool-proof and misuse of it can spoil the careers of innocent researchers. Rifai *et al.*^[21] checked the suspected duplicates in three journals, The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM), Clinical Chemistry, and The Lancet, since 1975. They concluded that many articles found to be duplicate by de ja vu were not so on careful detailed evaluation.

Editors are responsible for everything published in their journals and therefore should have a proactive approach in matters related to scientific misconduct. The responsibility to maintain the integrity of the literature rests with editors, reviewers, authors, as well as the readers. All should understand that the aim of a publication should be to advance the knowledge of the discipline as a whole and not just adding numbers to the publication of an author.

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