

Plagiarism and publication ethics: Dos and don'ts

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The publication of a scientific manuscript is the result of several months of careful planning and execution of a project. In the best interests of science, the work has to be carried out honestly and objectively without bias and the results should be reported truthfully. However, deviations may occur from the ideal due to ignorance or, at times, they may be willful deceptions. These deviations from the ideal, willful or otherwise, constitute what is known as “scientific misconduct”. While various types of scientific misconduct have been identified, those that come to notice usually include fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, cyberplagiarism, self-plagiarism, and duplicate publication.^[1-8]

To deal with cases of scientific misconduct, countries like the USA have set up the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) under the aegis of Public Health Service (PHS), which not only helps to define scientific misconduct, but also sets guidelines for institutes.

WHAT IS PLAGIARISM?

The English word “plagiarism” comes from the Latin word “plagiarius” meaning kidnapper and the Greek word “plagion,” meaning something that is not direct.^[5]

To put it simply, plagiarism is the failure to acknowledge other colleagues’ scientific work-their ideas, language, or data. It may include verbatim copying of passages without citing the original contributor, rewording of ideas, paraphrasing, and even total reproduction by simply changing the authors’ names and trying to pass the material as one’s own. While this is frequently done willfully, there may be genuine

instances where the authors may be unaware that their actions can be dubbed as plagiarism.

The ORI describes plagiarism as “theft or misappropriation of intellectual property and the substantial unattributed textual copying of another’s work. It does not include authorship or credit disputes. The theft or misappropriation of intellectual property includes the unauthorized use of ideas or unique methods obtained by a privileged communication, such as a grant or manuscript review. Substantial unattributed textual copying of another’s work means the unattributed verbatim or nearly verbatim copying of sentences and paragraphs which materially mislead the ordinary reader regarding the contributions of the author”.^[3]

In 1999, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)^[4] defined plagiarism as, “Plagiarism ranges from the unreferenced use of others’ published and unpublished ideas, including research grant applications to submission under “new” authorship of a complete paper, sometimes in a different language. It may occur at any stage of planning, research, writing, or publication: it applies to print and electronic versions.”

HOW DOES PLAGIARISM HARM?

Berk^[9] called plagiarism as a “serious violation of collegial trust, the fundamental principle on which the integrity of medical journalism depends.” He called it “deception and the theft of intellectual property.” It harms the unattributed author’s interest.

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HOW TO DETECT PLAGIARISM?

Although it is generally difficult to detect plagiarism, advances in information technology are making it increasingly possible. One of the important responsibilities of a reviewer is detection of plagiarized text due to his/her familiarity with published material in his/her area of interest. Our journal's manuscript submission site now provides a plagiarism check facility for editors. Hence, each submitted article goes through this software to check for sentences that are copied from previously published articles. An article can be rejected at any stage of publication if it is found that sentences are reproduced without attribution to the original work. Worse still, if the same is pointed out after publication, an article can be declared as withdrawn.

Moreover, the availability of dedicated web sites designed to provide information on plagiarism (www.plagiarism.org) and software to detect plagiarism has made it easier for reviewers and editorial staff of journals to detect copying (www.ithenticate.com and www.turnitin.com). Frequently, authors try to pass off retrospective studies as prospective ones or deliberately omit references to earlier works. These are usually detected during the editorial process but fraud may still escape detection at times.

DOS AND DON'TS OF PLAGIARISM^[8,10-13]

Some simple tips to be followed are:

- attribute references
- describe all sources of information
- give acknowledgments
- provide footnotes
- use quotation marks wherever required
- paraphrase the original, attributed work
- for extensive quotations, obtain permission from the publisher of the original work
- avoid self-plagiarism by taking permission from the publisher of the previous article authored by you
- obtain permission for use of published drawings or other illustrations

It is of utmost importance to remember that all permissions have to be sought before the article is sent for publication.

“In a lifetime of reading, theorizing, and experimenting, a person's work will inevitably incorporate and overlap with that of others. However, occasional overlap is one thing; systematic, unacknowledged use of the techniques, data,

words or ideas of others is another. Erring on the side of excess generosity in attribution is best.”^[10]

HOW TO DEAL WITH PLAGIARISM?

According to the code of conduct for editors as laid down by COPE: “If editors suspect misconduct by authors, reviewers, editorial staff, or other editors, then they have a duty to take action. This duty extends to both published and unpublished papers. Editors should first seek a response from those accused. If the editors are not satisfied with the response, they should ask the employers of the authors, reviewers, or editors, or some other appropriate body (perhaps a regulatory body) to investigate (in the case of their own editorial staff, they must conduct the investigation themselves)”^[4] and take appropriate action.

First and foremost for editors is to distinguish between deliberate or accidental plagiarism. The repercussions of a false accusation of plagiarism can be devastating for the professional career of a scientist. Editors should, as a policy, ask for raw data for the editor's office to verify in case of an allegation. Besides helping adjudicate a matter, it would prevent stigmatizing genuine error. For complex cases, it may be appropriate to have a national body like the ORI in the USA help editors respond and judge cases. Plagiarism in all its forms needs to be exposed and universally condemned. The editors may also if they deem it fit advise a victim regarding his legal options-both criminal and civil.

CONCLUSION

The onus is on all scientists to increase education and awareness of ethical issues pertaining to scientific publications. Allegations of plagiarism should be taken seriously and investigated thoroughly with the help of systematic reviews and special software. If plagiarism is detected, an article may not be just rejected but the employer of the author/s may be informed and requested to take appropriate action. If published, the article should be retracted. Public disgrace would deter new and recurrent plagiarists. Institutions and professional associations should take cognizance of the act of plagiarism and initiate appropriate action.

I would like to end where Christopher Martyn^[14] began with Albert Einstein's words, “Many people say that it is the intellect which makes a great scientist. They are wrong: it is character”.

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