

Plagiarism, copyright violation, duplication, fabrication, false statements, breach of research and publication ethics

Sir,

The Oxford dictionary defines plagiarism as “To take and use somebody else’s ideas, words, etc. as if they were one’s own.” According to the Chambers dictionary, the plagiarist is a kind of thief, “one who steals the thoughts or writings of others and gives them out as his own.” When a thief steals a material asset, his gain is individual and so is the loss of his victim. However, when a doctor commits plagiarism, he/she is endangering the public trust in the health care profession. In today’s “publish or perish” environment, where plagiarism is used to climb up the ladder in one’s academic career, to get promotions or to build one’s reputation as a great researcher, an additional dimension of dishonesty gets added. There are many forms of plagiarism. One of these is self-plagiarism, in which one reproduces or duplicates whole or part of one’s own previously published material without taking permission from the editor of the journal in which the work was previously published thus committing copyright violation. While submitting previously published material to a new journal, the authors generally have to make a declaration that this material or substantially similar material has not been fully or partially published by another author or by the same authors in another journal. Such declaration amounts to making a “false statement.” Fabrication of the data, although not a form a plagiarism, is a serious violation of research and publication ethics. According to the Oxford dictionary, fabrication means “make up something false.” One example of fabrication is to make up data for a period during which the researcher(s) was/were not involved in conducting the research. The research and publication ethics revolve around “honesty” and demand that the researchers should not plagiarize, make false statements, commit copyright violation or fabricate their research data.

The term “plagiarism” has been in the news in the subcontinent over the past few months. Punjab University, Lahore forced five of its teachers at its

center for High Energy Physics into early retirement after it was proved that they had plagiarized. There was a news in September 2007 that six professors and the director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences were accused of fraudulently republishing their own material in different journals. In this background, it was shocking to note yet another act of plagiarism from the subcontinent, when I happened to read the article titled “Many faces of cutaneous leishmaniasis” in the Jan–Feb 2008 issue of the *Indian Journal of Dermatology Venereology and Leprology* (IJDVL).^[1] This article is not simple plagiarism but also involves fabrication of the data, as is evident from the following discussion:

1. The authors in the above-mentioned article of IJDVL have shown a clinical photograph of plantar leishmaniasis affecting the sole of the foot in Figure 5 of the article. I have already published this case as first author in the British Journal of Dermatology in 1998.^[2] The pre-treatment clinical photograph of this case was published as “Figure 3” in this paper of mine. The Figure 5 published in IJDVL was taken by me 2 weeks after starting the treatment of the same case. The site, morphology and even the dermatoglyphic pattern confirm beyond any shadow of doubt that both pictures belong to the same patient. I own and possess the original negatives of both pictures in the same film. This photograph has been published without my knowledge and permission. This is a glaring example of plagiarism.
2. The “lid leishmaniasis case” along with the clinical photograph represented in “Figure 4” in their subject article^[1] has already been published by the first author in the Journal of College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan (JCPSP).^[3] The names of the second and third authors mentioned in the JCPSP article have not been credited in the article published in IJDVL. Rather, a new author Rahman SB has been credited as the second author. This material, after publication, became the property and copyright of JCPSP. The managing editor of JCPSP when contacted confirmed that permission for reproducing the said photograph in IJDVL was not sought by the authors. The authors have thus committed copyright violation. Moreover, the authors have not declared in their IJDVL article that the said figure had already been published in JCPSP and permission had been granted by JCPSP

for reproducing the same in IJDVL. They would have rather made a declaration on submitting the article to IJDVL that “Neither this manuscript nor one with substantially similar content under my/our authorship has been published or is being considered for publication elsewhere, except as described in the covering letter” (copied from the copyright agreement of IJDVL). They have thus made a “false statement” by holding back the information that “Figure 4” had already been published in JCPSP.

3. The authors have claimed in their paper in IJDVL that the study was purportedly carried out between January 2003 and December 2005 at PAF Hospital Sargodha, Pakistan. However, the same authors have coauthored another publication from Sierra Leone, Africa, in which they have claimed that they were conducting the said research in Sierra Leone from November 2004 to October 2005.^[4] This means that during this period they could not have been conducting the research published in IJDVL at Sargodha, Pakistan. I have personal knowledge that none of the two authors were working at PAF Hospital Sargodha between November 2004 to October 2005. The data presented for this period has been fabricated.
4. In yet another article titled miltefosine in cutaneous leishmaniasis, the same authors have claimed that this study was conducted at the Military Hospital Rawalpindi (Pakistan) from March to October 2005.^[5] During the same period, they were purportedly conducting studies at the PAF Hospital Sargodha (Pakistan) and in Sierra Leone Africa. This means that they were purportedly working at three different centers across the globe at the same time.
5. The same authors have previously published somewhat similar data under an almost similar title in the Journal of Pakistan Association of Dermatologists in 2002.^[6] The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 of this article are significantly similar to the one presented in Figure 7 and Table 1 of their IJDVL article, respectively. This is once again an example of self-plagiarism and duplication. Moreover, Figures 3 and 4 of this article do not belong to the authors and are rather my property, were taken by me and I own and possess their original negatives.

Hence proved, the article under discussion is a classical example of plagiarism, copyright violation, duplication, fabrication and intellectual dishonesty. The issue is particularly serious because this involves doctors. Trustworthiness is the cornerstone of our profession. The patients share their personal and family information with their doctor because they feel that their doctor is trustworthy. Recently, a plagiarising doctor's name was erased from the medical register in the United Kingdom.^[7] In its determinations, the panel referred to paragraph 44 of the General Medical Council's Indicative Sanctions Guidance April 2005, which states that: “Dishonesty, even where it does not result in direct harm to the patients, is particularly serious because it undermines the trust the public place in the profession.” Therefore, the employers and the registering body of these authors should review their fitness to practice medical profession because they have lost their trustworthiness. Moreover, the editor of IJDVL needs to take serious note of this issue as this shall negatively affect the reputation and credibility of the journal. The article must be retrieved from the journal and their employer/registering body must be notified of the offences committed by them.

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