

Pirates of Plagiarism Proposed courses of action to deal with plagiarism

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Sir,

Creativity in scientific writing has been adversely affected by plagiarism. The phrase stating that 'originality is the art of hiding the source' no longer holds true in the current internet era. Protecting the rights of creative thinkers in science and literature is a major concern due to the knowledge explosion of the new millennium. The fight against plagiarism is designed to give due credit to the innovator, thus respecting the novelty of the creation. Whether a minor modification to existing knowledge makes it 'new' is a vital question.

The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) has explicitly defined plagiarism as the "use of others' published and unpublished ideas or words (or other intellectual property) without attribution or permission, and presenting them as new and original rather than derived from an existing source".¹ It can take various forms, including the plagiarism of ideas; plagiarism of text; mosaic plagiarism; duplicate publication or salami slicing; self-plagiarism, and cyber-plagiarism. Journals are beset with articles giving practical advice to researchers on how to avoid plagiarism. With the advent of software programs to detect plagiarism, e.g. Turnitin or iThenticate (iParadigms, LLC, Oakland, California, USA), many plagiarised articles have been identified and retracted from eminent journals.

The responsibility for a published article is shared by three players: the author, editor and reader. The Office of Research Integrity (ORI) in the USA and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) in the UK have issued guidelines for editors and institutes on how to deal with publication misconduct.^{2,3} Documents which include instructions to the authors focus on the requirements of the publishing journal. However, readers are often left in the lurch when they encounter plagiarism or when their own paper has been plagiarised. They should be made aware of the approach to be adopted in order to expose scientific misconduct.

The reported case of Asim Kurjak provides an inconclusive ending to the eternal problem of plagiarism.⁴ An eminent academic and obstetrician, Kurjak was declared guilty of "violations of the [committee's] ethics code... and of common norms in biomedical publishing" by the Croatian Committee for Ethics in Science & Higher Education.⁴ His institution, the University of Zagreb School of Medicine in Croatia, kept the matter quiet so as to protect the integrity of their reputation for research. Despite the matter being pursued for over 15 years, very little could be achieved.⁴ Similarly, the authors of this letter also encountered an article which had been plagiarised from two other articles.⁵⁻⁷ In spite of our communications to the editor with relevant evidence, the article in question unfortunately continues to enjoy a place on the journal's website.⁵

Possible courses of action are suggested below to be undertaken by either the reader on encountering plagiarism or by the author whose article has been plagiarised. In the case of a non-response from the offending parties, approaches for rectification are also expressed. There is a need to come up with ways to sternly deal with situations of this kind. We believe the approaches listed below will stimulate readers to ponder over several issues that need to be addressed on a larger scale.

First, one may ask: *What can or should be done by the reader on encountering plagiarism?* The reader has a moral responsibility to inform the editor publishing the plagiarised article. Concrete evidence of this misdemeanor must be provided for verification. The whistleblower (reader) should be kept in the loop regarding the progress of the investigation. Moreover, the reader should pursue the issue to its culmination. Failing a response from the editor of the plagiarised article, the reader should approach the journal owning the copyright of the original article and the plagiarised author for necessary rectification.

The second question is: *What can be done by the plagiarised author?* In cases of plagiarism, the plagiarist and the editor of the plagiarised article are accountable. The plagiarised author should request a detailed investigation and disciplinary action by the editor. If the plagiarism has been proved beyond doubt, the offending article should be retracted along with an apology rendered by the plagiarist. In case of an unsatisfactory response, the plagiarist's

institute and/or funding agencies can be notified about the misconduct. In addition, the author can request for the intervention of relevant scientific associations, such as COPE, WAME, ORI and the General Medical Council.⁸

Both readers and authors may be interested to learn if legal action can be initiated against a plagiarist. Since the author assumes full responsibility for the paper and legally transfers the copyright to the publisher, any violations can result in criminal/civil charges and are liable for compensation. If the plagiarist escapes legal repercussions, they may be exposed publicly through the media and censured by the entire research community. A variety of sanctions may also be imposed on the plagiarist, such as a ban on any future publications for a stipulated period of time, the withdrawal of research funds or the suspension of their practice license, etc.⁸

Plagiarism is tempting and the ease of misappropriating the work of others has damaged the creative thinking abilities of many authors. However, it cannot serve as a shortcut to success. Any scientific misconduct, if unreported, may result in the duplication of data, theft of intellectual property, deception and a breach of collegial trust. Moreover, investigations of a plagiarist's research profile often exposures them as repeat offenders.⁵ A multipronged approach is essential to deal with this menace. Editors, reviewers and readers should be aware of all forms of plagiarism and the means by which they can be detected. Simultaneously, budding researchers must be trained and educated in ethical scientific writing from the beginning of their careers.⁸ Clear policies on plagiarism should be outlined by journals and shared with authors. Stringent action by editors to publicly expose the plagiarist and the fear of losing a professional reputation or employment may also serve as a deterrent to many potential offenders. This may also help to maintain the reputation of the editor, the reviewers, the journal and the publishing organisation. Claims by potential whistleblowers should be taken seriously when they are substantiated by concrete evidence. All academic institutions should have explicit anti-plagiarism guidelines and mandated policies in cases of proven misconduct. It is imperative that a culture of conscientious publishing be inculcated within the academic community to protect the interests of all scientists.

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