Editorial

Plagiarism – Part 11: Finding and Dealing with a Fraudster

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Recently, a French bio-gerontologist came across a paper in a Korean journal, which caused him to almost fall off his chair. The entire article (text and graphs included) had been lifted from one of his earlier published articles[1]. Although very rare, but a plagiarized article being coincidentally seen and then reported by the original author(s) can be a very embarrassing situation for a reputable journal. As editors and peer reviewers of a few local, regional and international medical/surgical journals, rarely a month goes by without us being confronted with a contention or evidence of plagiarism, duplicate publication, and/or multiple submissions. So how do we detect plagiarism and how do we deal with the academic and moral responsibility of exposing it once discovered? The responsibility lies with the peer reviewers to review systematically other similar publications when a manuscript is submitted to look for plagiarism and duplicate publications[2]. This is painstakingly identified manually which obviously underscores the need for an automated method to detect plagiarism and duplications. This paved the way for the production of powerful anti-plagiarism software by companies like iParadigms, LLC (iThenticate® and Turnitin®) to support the research community (Figure 1).

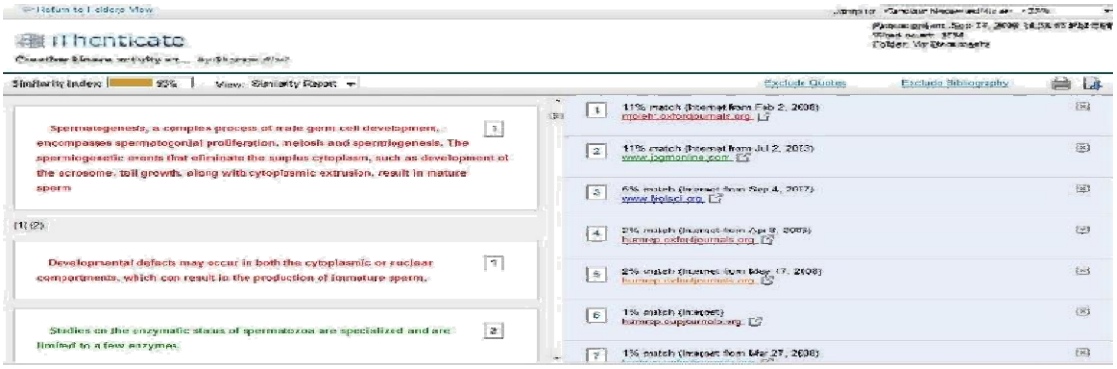

Figure 1: This Image is a Computer Screen-Shot Reproduced from a Plagiarized Article Detected by a Powerful Web-Based Plagiarism Detection Software Available from iParadigms, LLC. Known as iThenticate® – It Clearly Shows How the Software Detects the Plagiarism from the Original Articles (left column) and Lists the Sources in a Matching Color Code (right column)[3]

These software are proven tools that give publishers the power to check the originality of documents and manuscripts instantly, and they also allow them to find out if any of their current intellectual property is being misappropriated somewhere on the internet[3].

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The following is a brilliant metaphor for plagiarism detection technology by Bill Marsh in his 2007 book: 'They are like hounds, let loose on the Internet's vast storehouses'[4]. At Elsevier, a leading journal publisher, an article submitted simultaneously to two Elsevier publications will be automatically flagged, and peer reviewers can access the company's article database to search for suspected copycat phrasings. It has to be stressed that these modern plagiarism detection tools should only be seen as an extension of earlier approaches since they are not by any means prefect.

To recognize plagiarism is to recognize an ethical problem. As we mentioned in our previous article the technique of electronic preparation and submission of manuscripts has initiated a serious 'diseases' of the current word processing age where scientific misconduct in publishing is quickly becoming a prevalent problem[5]. This is due to the ease with which new manuscripts can be 'written' by simply copying verbatim (word-by-word) whole sections of previously published manuscripts[5]. These convey major ethical issues which are plaguing modern science publishing and have led to the establishment of the Committee on Publications Ethics (COPE), initially organized in 1997 by a group of 'medical journal editors concerned about publication misconduct, e.g. plagiarism, redundant publications, use of fraudulent data, unethical research, breaches of confidentiality'[5,6].

To avoid pit-falls, peer reviewers and editors are encouraged to follow good practice guidelines, such as those published by COPE (Figure 2). Editors can also access advice from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, The Vancouver Group) or the Council of Science Editors (CSE)[7]. If a satisfactory explanation cannot be supplied by the suspected plagiarist, then the editors should normally report any reasonable fears about academic misconduct to the plagiarists institution so that they can investigate and publish a 'notice of concern' where the initial case looks strong, followed by retraction when there is a finding of fraud or a major error[7]. On the other hand, authors are not the only ones under the spot-light, editors, publishers and peer reviewers also have major responsibilities. For example, reviewers have the duty of confidentiality during pre-publication; not to allow professional or personal jealousy and/or rivalry to influence or determine the information they pass on to the editors. Editors have a duty to maintain the integrity of the scientific documentation, which must take precedence over their other duties[7].

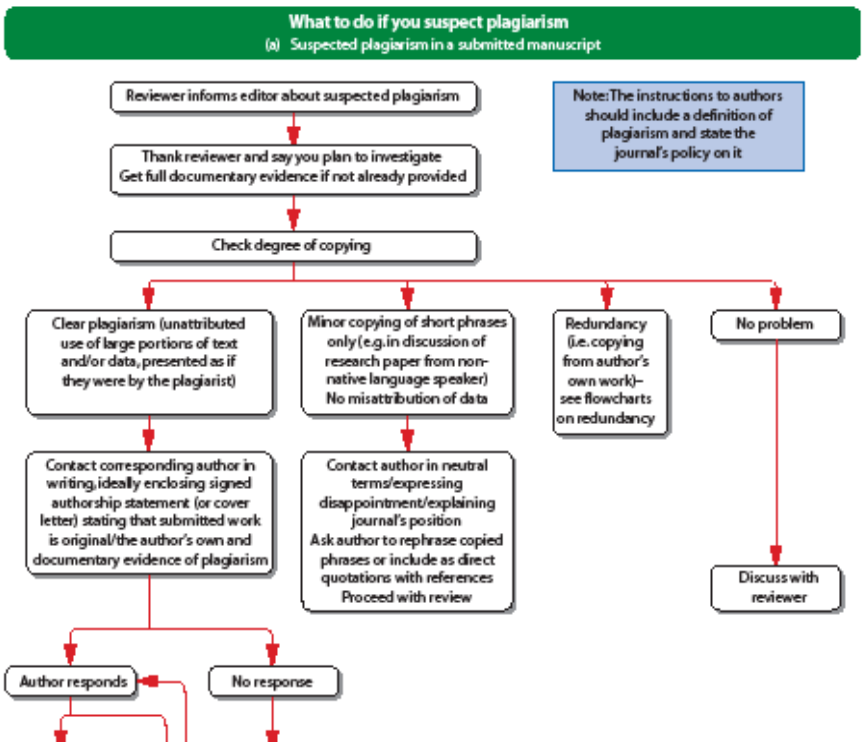
What to do if you suspect plagiarism
(a) Suspected plagiarism in a submitted manuscript
Reviewer informs editor about suspected plagiarism
Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate
Get full documentary evidence if not already provided
Check degree of copying
Note: The instructions to authors should include a definition of plagiarism and state the journal's policy on it
Clear plagiarism (unattributed use of large portions of text and/or data, presented as if they were by the plagiarist)
Minor copying of short phrases only (e.g. in discussion of research paper from non-native language speaker)
No misattribution of data
Redundancy (i.e. copying from author's own work) – see flowcharts on redundancy
No problem
Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that submitted work is original/the author's own and documentary evidence of plagiarism
Contact author in neutral terms/expressing disappointment/explaining journal's position
Ask author to rephrase copied phrases or include as direct quotations with references
Proceed with review
Discuss with reviewer
Author responds
No response

Figure 2: A Flowchart Algorithm Guideline on How to Deal with Suspected Plagiarism. This is Reproduced from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) by Blackwell Publishing (© 2006 Committee on Publication Ethics)

If plagiarized submissions were left to stand, they would significantly distort the scientific record. Most reputable institutions have zero tolerance for plagiarists. In fact, academic standards of intellectual honesty are often more demanding than governmental copyright laws[7,8]. There have been a significant number of cases around the world where people have lost their jobs or been denied positions and promotions because of plagiarism; unfortunately, this is not the case in GCC states where plagiarists, even when caught, continue without reprimand[7,8]. Recently, a well known serial plagiarist retained his position as senior editor of a local journal even after the full knowledge of his chief editor and the editorial board of his ethical misconduct. Is that journal retaining its reputability and credibility among its peers?

Finally I will quote an extract from the Norwegian Board of Health's 2005 report on a well known plagiarism case, which was referred to in Harvey Marcovitch's review on the matter: 'The research community must make an all-out effort to make plain research's traditional ideals of honesty, thoroughness, trustworthiness and openness'. We sincerely hope that this rings true in our region[7].

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