

Plagiarism: a joint statement from the Singapore Medical Journal and the Medical Journal of Malaysia

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Both the Singapore Medical Journal (SMJ) and the Medical Journal of Malaysia (MJM), have recently encountered a number of submissions of plagiarised work to our respective journals. This utterly dishonest practice is universally deplored by editors of all medical and scientific journals. As it is imperative that journal readers should be able to trust that what they are reading is original, we feel very strongly that punitive measures should be applied to authors found guilty of plagiarism, in order to discourage this undesirable practice. The academic career of an author found guilty of plagiarism may potentially be destroyed, in addition to reduction in the credibility of the plagiarist's coauthors, his or her professional colleagues, department and institution.

The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) defines plagiarism as the use of others' published and unpublished ideas or words (or other intellectual property) without attribution or permission, and presenting them as new and original rather than derived from an existing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⁾ To put it simply, this crime refers to stealing someone else's work or ideas, and passing it off as one's own. For a researcher, this form of scientific misconduct represents fraud of the worst order. WAME further states that "the intent and effect of plagiarism is to mislead the reader as to the contributions of the plagiarizer". This applies whether the ideas or words are taken from abstracts, research grant applications, institutional review board applications, or unpublished or published manuscripts in any publication format, whether print or electronic.⁽¹⁾ The boundaries of what constitutes plagiarism are therefore not limited just to journal articles or other published work, but includes someone else's ideas or words in all forms, so long as intellectual theft occurs.

There are, however, grey areas such as paraphrasing versus quoting, and self-plagiarism. Paraphrasing refers to the practice of restating a text or passage giving the meaning in another form; in short, a rewording of the original sentence or group of sentences. Some authors paraphrase in an attempt to overcome the increasingly common practice of "cut and paste" research. As a rough

guide, using more than 5% of other articles in their words may be regarded as plagiarism. Where a paraphrase is unable to convey the full message from the original paper or if there is a danger of misinterpretation, the exact words can be quoted using quotation marks. The problem in quoting is that, if too liberally used, it may reflect a lack of original ideas or analytical interpretation, and may paradoxically encourage the tendency to plagiarise. Currently, there still remain divergent views about what constitutes plagiarism versus appropriate paraphrasing. For example, in investigating cases of plagiarism, the US Office of Research Integrity (ORI) "does not pursue the limited use of identical or nearly-identical phrases which describe a commonly-used methodology or previous research because ORI does not consider such use as substantially misleading to the reader or of great significance".⁽²⁾

WAME defines self-plagiarism as the practice of an author using portions of their previous writings on the same topic in another of their publications, without specifically citing it formally in quotes.⁽¹⁾ There is no consensus as to whether this is a form of scientific misconduct, or how many of one's own words one can "steal from oneself" before it truly constitutes "plagiarism". This is probably the reason why self-plagiarism is not regarded in the same light as plagiarism of the ideas and words of other individuals. However, some take the opposing viewpoint that duplication publication is but a continuum of self-plagiarism, and leads to undesirable "salami" science. The act of re-using substantial portions of already-published text without proper referencing is ethically problematic, as it violates the implicit reader-writer contract that what the reader is reading is original and new. As most authors would have transferred the ownership of his or her work to the publisher, any self-plagiarism would therefore technically violate the copyright that has previously been assigned to the publisher.

Plagiarism may be detected at various stages of manuscript processing by the editorial office and reviewers, and after publication, by other readers including the victim(s) of plagiarism. Editors can

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monitor their own journals for plagiarised articles by using the “related article” feature of PubMed. Google/Google Scholar covers databases such as PubMed and PubMed Central and a large number of PDF documents on servers of numerous academic institutions. The effectiveness of this and other online search services in detecting plagiarism depends on the coverage of the underlying databases that the submitted manuscript is being checked against, and the uniqueness of the selected sequence/phrase. Experienced editors or writers will be able to pick up various tell-tale signs of plagiarisms such as unevenness of writing style, unexplained switching between UK and US spelling in the same document, and disproportionately small number of references in relation to text.

If plagiarism is attempted or occurs, authors should expect editorial action to be taken. The editor, sometimes with the assistance of his editorial team, will conduct initial fact-finding, including correspondence with the authors for their explanations. If the inquiry concludes that plagiarism had indeed occurred and if the manuscript is still being processed, it will be promptly rejected. If the article has already been published, then a notice of plagiarism may be published. The offending paper will be formally withdrawn or retracted from the scientific literature, and the indexing authorities (e.g. National Library of Medicine) informed. A formal letter of reprimand will be sent to the author, copied to the relevant

heads of the author’s department and institution, together with the evidence collected by the journal. For the SMJ, copies of this letter will also be sent to the editors of the MJM and the Annals Academy of Medicine Singapore. The author will be further informed that the SMJ and MJM will not longer be interested in considering his or her future submissions. We believe that these actions reflect the seriousness of the offence. This policy is in line with the recommendations of WAME,⁽¹⁾ the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors,⁽³⁾ and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). COPE has developed excellent flowcharts that provide algorithms for editors who have queries related to publication misconduct.⁽⁴⁾

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