EDITORIAL

Plagiarism: a cause for concern

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ABSTRACT

Incorrect attribution of somebody else's work or idea as one's own without adequate citation of the original source is called plagiarism. This is considered a serious ethical problem. Most authors do not know that this is unacceptable. Most of them, who know, are not aware what exactly constitutes plagiarism. This editorial is written with an intention to increase awareness regarding this important issue. I discussed the concept and various types of plagiarism, focussing only on biomedical research. Some suggestions on how to be at guard against plagiarism have been discussed.

Keywords: plagiarism, medical writing, publication ethics

INTRODUCTION:

"They lard their lean books with the fat of others work."

- Sir Richard Burton

It is very important that authors should present and discuss scientific data in an accurate, ethical and honest way. Plagiarism is one of the very important problems which have been plaguing literature, art and science since times immemorial. According to Oxford dictionary of literary terms, 'plagiarism' is "the theft of ideas or of written passages or works, where these are passed off as one's own work without acknowledgement of their true origin; or a piece of writing thus stolen..... A person practising this form of literary theft is a 'plagiarist'. The older term 'plagiary' was applied both to plagiarisms and to plagiarists". World Association of Medical Editors' (WAME's) position on plagiarism

'Plagiarism is the use of others' published and unpublished ideas or words (or other intellectual property) without attribution or permission, and presenting them as new and original rather than derived from an existing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. 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the ideas or words are taken from abstracts, research grant applications, Institutional Review Board applications, or unpublished or published manuscripts in any publication format (print or electronic). Plagiarism is scientific misconduct and should be addressed as such'.

History

The phrase "plagiarism" is derived from the Latin word "plagiare" which means to "kidnap. In the 1st century, Roman poet Martial accused another poet of "kidnapping his verses'. Dramatist Ben Jonson used the word 'plagiary' in 1601, to indicate someone who is guilty of literary theft'. The word plagiarism was first used in English around 1620.

Types of plagiarism

Plagiarism may be done unintentionally or may be a deliberate one. There are various forms of plagiarism. Many different types have been proposed, but following are the ones most often reported in published literature:

Plagiarism of ideas

Using someone else's ideas without proper acknowledgement constitutes plagiarism. The author may not have used the same words, but he still may be accused of this. Researchers may replicate earlier studies in their own countries. This is acceptable if it builds on the earlier data, or if culture significantly affects the manifestation of a disease. However the original study which substantially influenced the current study should be properly cited and acknowledged.

Smith comments '...for literature that is submitted to peer-reviewed periodicals, work from the minds of others must be acknowledged. It does not mean that it is improper to build on the work of others, just that the contribution of
the originator be recognized and the original publication be referenced'. [7]

Students are supposed to do thesis and research work. Thesis work is an essential part fulfilment of postgraduate education. Research work, especially publication in scientific journals is increasingly being recognized as important for career advancement. [6] In some teaching institutes students tend to copy ideas from old thesis work. They may however fail to cite the original source. Unfortunately even some research guides seem to encourage such unethical practice. The same guides, who are supposed to inculcate healthy research aptitude, tend to teach short cuts to 'so called success'. [1] Many students and for that matter teachers, are not aware that this constitutes plagiarism, and is unacceptable.

In the field of research, the concept of 'publish or perish' is prevailing. Publication in high impact, indexed journals (especially pub med, EMBASE, etc) is considered prestigious. [8] Unfortunately this has resulted in a 'rat race'.

Medical Council of India has made publication in scientific journals a criterion for promotions in academic institutions. This is a commendable job. The clinicians' who were contented with 'patient care' now want to be recognized as 'researchers'. However, a few of them are engaging in such unethical publication practices such as plagiarism, duplicate / redundant publication, fabricated research, and so on. The main reason for this is that though they have acquired their postgraduate degrees, a few of them do not have sufficient expertise, aptitude, and interest to do research. But they cannot leave their dream of publishing, because they too want to be counted as 'researchers' and 'teachers'. Some clinicians, who are otherwise not interested in research work, half-heartedly get involved in research only to meet the criteria for promotions. But that is acceptable as long as research is done in good faith, and for larger benefit. Research work should not suffer with personal motives. 'Research should not be need based!' [6]

Plagiarism of text or "word-for-word" plagiarism [9] (direct plagiarism)

This is described as "...copying a portion of text from another source without giving credit to its author and without enclosing the borrowed text in quotation marks." [10]

Easy internet access has made plagiarist's job easier. The whole world is indulging in cut-copy-paste culture, and India is no exception! But a word of caution: same technology has given birth to plagiarism detecting softwares, and some editors are now using these to screen the submitted manuscripts. Copying a large amount of text verbatim is not the only thing which qualifies for plagiarism. Some researchers copy just a few phrases, and they may still be accused of this. [11]

Mosaic plagiarism

This is described as '...borrowing the ideas and opinions from an original source and a few verbatim words or phrases without crediting the original author'. In this case, the plagiarist intertwines his or her own ideas and opinions with those of the original author, creating a confused, plagiarized mass. [11] Adequate referencing, and quoting the original words in inverted commas helps reader understand which words are the author's own. [11]

Self-plagiarism

This is also known as 'recycling fraud'. [12] Self-plagiarism simply speaking is quoting one's own earlier work without proper citation. For reasons mentioned above, researchers tend to engage in duplicate / redundant publication. This basically means that there is a single data, and there are multiple publications from the same data. Committee On Publication Ethics (COPE) prohibits this. [13] This may only be allowed when each study on its own merit a separate publication. In such a case subsequent publications should cite the first study. Most of the editors now ask authors to declare that there is an earlier publication using the same data, and how the present study merits separate publication. Editor may allow publication of such a paper under special circumstances.

What is not plagiarism?

'Common knowledge' is that which most of us are aware of. [14] For example, 'India got Independence in 1947'. All of us know this fact, and this is in public domain. Therefore this statement does not need citation.

Detecting plagiarism: whose responsibility!

Everybody involved in publication process, and in the growth of science is responsible for detecting plagiarism. But it is the authors' ultimate responsibility. Plagiarism may be detected by the editor, reviewer, editorial board member, publisher, or by anyone else involved in publication process. The peer reviewer is supposed to see whether the author has engaged in this type of unethical behaviour. If he becomes aware of this, he should inform the editor, who in turn warns the author. The reviewer may recommend rejection of such a manuscript. The editor may also detect plagiarism even though the reviewer has passed it. [11] Sometimes post-publication, the readers and the original authors (of the original article) may become aware of this and may complain. Authors particularly, and publishers keep track of their work to see if somebody has plagiarised them.

Why we need to guard ourselves against plagiarism?

Plagiarism is not considered a criminal offence, but it is unethical to do so. [15] This may also account for copyright

violation. Once the editor is aware of plagiarism, he takes the ultimate decision. He is guided by journal policy. He may also seek editorial board members' advice. If the error is minimal or unintentional, he may ask the author to explain, revise the manuscript, and cite the source properly. But if it severe or deliberate, it is a serious ethical and legal issue. Such a paper may be prevented from publication. [1]

If the article gets published and plagiarism is detected post-publication, such a paper may be retracted. Strict disciplinary action may be taken. Severe penalties may be imposed on a plagiarist. He may be blacklisted, and may be banned from further publication. The issue may be notified to his employers, professional bodies (of which author may be a member). The employer may further decide to terminate him from his job. He may not get funding for his research. He loses credibility. Plagiarism causes harm not only to the author, but also to everybody involved in publication process. The journal (and other associated journals) may also lose its reputation. [1]

Chalmers in his editorial in BMJ reports his struggle to expose a recurrent plagiarist. [17]

**Why researchers plagiarise?**

In Sapatnekar's words, 'To do this (plagiarism) overtly demonstrates your brazeness. To do it covertly amounts to cowardice. To do it efficiently qualifies as an expertise; since ultimate success of a theft essentially lies in the theft passing undetected.' He also comments, '....plagiarism and her two twins - fabrication and falsification, emanate from sheer human greed. There may be psychological and evolutionary basis for such behaviour. Yet in the arena of science, there is need for behaviour modulation - more with 'carrots' and less with 'sticks'. Our further evolution ought to be acquisitional - respecting intellectual property - rather than adaptive in the struggle for our existence as scientists'. [18]

Researchers resort to plagiarism very early in their career. [19] In a study by Bili?-Zulle et al, over 90% of second year medical students were found to engage in plagiarism. [20] Ryan et al did a questionnaire based assessment of pharmacy students' perceptions of plagiarism. Most of the respondents were not aware of this important issue. They did not consider this was a serious issue at all. [21]

There are some reasons why people plagiarize. These include; i) not being sensitized to research integrity policies, iii) poor language skills, iv) negative attitudes toward plagiarism. Mavrinac et al developed *Attitudes Toward Plagiarism Questionnaire* to measure attitudes of researchers toward plagiarism. The authors report good psychometric characteristics of this instrument, and propose that this may be of use for research on plagiarism, [22] and v) cultural values. [8, 22-24]

**How to avoid plagiarism** [1]

- It is not sufficient to read only abstract of papers. Read and understand full text. 'Paraphrase' the words. This means restating the author's quotation using one's own words. Try not to rely on the words of the author. Always cite the original source.
- If it is absolutely essential to use exact words, phrases, or sentences, use quotation marks' and cite the source. Some editors are very particular that quoted text in inverted commas even with adequate citation should not be used too often. That is true as the whole article in that case is nothing but material derived from other sources, leaving no room for author's own observations.
- Strictly adhere to the journal manuscript submission and referencing style guidelines.
- Beware of copyright policies.
- Do not use the same data for writing multiple separate articles. If it is absolutely needed that each study merits separate publication on its own, inform the editor in covering letter, and cite your earlier publication.
- If possible take help of some English Language editing service.
- Let somebody knowledgeable in field and good at English proof read your article.
- If someone detects plagiarism in your article, sincerely apologize! There is no point arguing. Revise and resubmit your article.
- Even after submission, if you accidentally discover that you have plagiarised, immediately inform the editor, and apologize. Editors appreciate an honest and sincere confession.

**A word of caution:** Like principal author each coauthor is accountable for the submitted manuscript. Each manuscript before submission should be screened for plagiarism. 'No longer can a prominent investigator deny accountability for plagiarism because a junior coauthor copied text without his or her knowledge'. [25] Authorship is not just to share credit. One needs to share responsibility too.

**Conclusions**

Chalmers recommends that, i) in case of alleged plagiarism, the journals and institutions need to respond, and take appropriate action against plagiarist, ii) plagiarism detecting software should be used, iii) once an act of plagiarism is confirmed, the plagiarist should be publicly exposed. He also advocates 'systematic reviews for editorial peer review'. [17]
My comments

Research is still in infancy in India. Many Indian researchers including senior researchers are not sensitized to 'plagiarism'. However, ignorance will not be accepted as an excuse.

Young researchers especially because of their earnest desire to get recognized immediately resort to 'short cuts'. 'Research and publication ethics' should be an essential part of undergraduate and postgraduate education, and it is imperative that students should be taught about this early in their career.

For many authors, English is a foreign language. In my opinion this is one of the most important factors responsible for unintentional plagiarism. Authors may find it difficult to paraphrase the original words. There is a dire need for editors to be aware of this. Otherwise they may take serious action against the 'so-called plagiarist'. Unwarranted accusations of plagiarism may devastate individuals. There is an inherent risk that researchers may get discouraged to make attempts at publishing in future. Let us make research interesting and challenging, not frightening. Sufficient opportunity and time for revision of manuscript should be given.

Shafer, the editor of Anesthesia & Analgesia says, 'I try to avoid being too judgmental about plagiarism for scientific English, recognizing that it must be a nightmare for authors to publish in a language they do not speak..... In most cases, I issue an initial decision letter to the author requesting that the author rewrite the verbatim text.' [25]

In this era of internet I found citing other authors very interesting and useful. It has helped me tremendously. As soon as I cite others, my paper gets linked to their paper. It indirectly increases citation of my paper. And my paper becomes highly accessed. Also when the initial author does a similar study, there is a high likelihood that he may cite my paper. Thus a large research database emerges in favour of or against, a concept or treatment. This ultimately helps everybody.

All trainees everywhere begin as foreigners to the world of academic science and research publication, unfamiliar with its rituals and language. Considering others' perspectives on scientific integrity and norms of practice enhances collegial understanding across research environments and offers trainees and their faculty the opportunity to build a truly international research community'. [26]

"Most people say that it is the intellect which makes a great scientist. They are wrong: it is character."

- Albert Einstein

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