

### Editorial

## Plagiarism: A blight and a pestilence for medical journals

*Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health*, 2016; 45(4): 239-240

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4038/slch.v45i4.8181>

(Key words: Plagiarism, medical journal)

The word plagiarism has been reported to have originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century from the Latin word *plagiare* which means to kidnap. The definition of the word plagiarism as provided by The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) 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 the use of others' published and unpublished ideas or words (or other intellectual property) without attribution or permission, and presenting them as new and original rather than derived from an existing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"<sup>1</sup>. At the present time, it is one of the globally recognised disreputable phenomena in medical scientific writing. It can and does occur in several different forms and while some are quite subtle, others would undoubtedly rank as forms of gross scientific misconduct. These are likely to have grave ethical and even legal connotations. There are many reasons as to why authors resort to various forms of plagiarism. Some are unintentional and are undertaken through ignorance. Yet for all that, there are very serious violations which are likely to have dire consequences.

At the outset, one needs to try and look at the differences between copyright infringements and plagiarism. Although there is some overlap, there are clear fundamental differences between copyright infringement and plagiarism. The key difference between plagiarism and copyright infringement is that not all plagiarisms are infringements and not all infringements are plagiarisms<sup>2</sup>. Copyright law gives a copyright holder (usually the creator of the work) a set of rights that they and they alone can exploit legally (save for exceptions such as fair use)<sup>2</sup>. Those rights include the right to reproduce (copy) a work, the right to create derivative works based upon it, the right to distribute copies of the work to the public and the right to publicly display or perform the work<sup>2</sup>. It is necessary to clearly state that copyright infringement is a very broad term, rooted in the law, that covers a wide range of unlawful activities that violate the rights (granted by the law) to copyright holders<sup>2</sup>. But where copyright infringement is a construct of the law, plagiarism is a construct of ethics<sup>2</sup>. Most broadly, plagiarism is defined as the taking the original work or works of another and presenting it as your own<sup>2</sup>. The definition of "work" can include a variety of things including ideas, words, images, etc. Anything that is seen as an unethical and unattributed use of another's original creation can be defined as plagiarism<sup>2</sup>.

There are several types of plagiarism. Direct plagiarism or plagiarism of text is perhaps the most serious of all types of this problem and refers to copying a portion of writing or text from another source without giving due credit to its author and without enclosing the borrowed text in quotation marks<sup>3</sup>. It is also referred to as verbatim plagiarism or word-to-word plagiarism<sup>4</sup>.

A rather ingenious and delicate variation of direct copying of text is known as mosaic plagiarism. In that situation the author uses synonyms and alternatives for certain words of an area of text but still retains the general language structure and meaning as found in the original. It is also known as 'patch writing'. Very clever reproductions could be made in this manoeuvre but it remains a dishonest and punishable offence. Technically, it would be classified as stealing of someone else's work.

Another variety of plagiarism consists of plagiarism of ideas. The author in these instances would use the same ideas, thoughts and even invention without any attribution to the original source and make the readers believe that it is the author's original work. It is also seen during Seminar and Conference Presentations. If the original source is aptly and clearly acknowledged in the presentation it is perhaps acceptable.

Self-Plagiarism is another form of this problem. This phenomenon is clearly documented by Sally Morris *et al* as "When an author (or another author from the same research project) repeats text and/or data from his/her (or the team's) previously published work, either verbatim or with minimal rewording, as well as redundant or duplicate publication in a new article without clear acknowledgement, this is defined as self- (or team) plagiarism"<sup>5</sup>. In certain situations assessment of this type of plagiarism can be quite difficult.

It is now the practice of quite a few journals to use Similarity Check Software to detect plagiarism. These software programs would detect similarities of an article against published material based on the requirements and filters set by the operator. If adequate care is not taken, some expected repetitions of text may appear as plagiarism. This is often found in the methods section of articles and the bibliography. These are sometimes necessary duplications and need to be carefully assessed. Some

of the programs provide filters to exclude some areas of text such as the methods and bibliography. Although certain arbitrary values such as 20 per cent of the text and even one third of the text, have been used to delineate significant plagiarism, it is clearly necessary to carefully look at the results to see the actual degree of similarity and to assess whether the incriminated content has been adequately attributed.

As clearly stated in the Research Integrity section of the website<sup>6</sup>, the Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health has embarked on a committed venture to curb plagiarism in the articles published in the journal from January 2016. The mission is to provide zero tolerance to significant plagiarism. The journal uses CrossRef iThenticate Plagiarism Detection Software<sup>7</sup>, sponsored for the use of the journal by the International Network for Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) of Oxford, UK. All articles are now uploaded and assessed by the programme and a Joint Editor undertakes the complete evaluation of the article for significant plagiarism. The course of action that would be embarked on by the journal, following detection of significant plagiarism, would be on the lines recommended by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)<sup>8</sup>.

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The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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