

## The Sad Saga and Unfortunate Trend of Plagiarism in Biomedical Journals. Can We Prevent This Global Avalanche?

Zahid Hussain Khan\*

*Department of Anesthesiology, Imam Khomeini Medical Center, School of Medicine, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran*

In the recent past and at present we have observed and seen a great uproar about plagiarism. The furore about this dreaded term has not abated and continues to be projected widely both in the internet and the news media. This sorry state of affairs and the fact that it is on the rise and challenges our intellectual integrity as research workers prompted me to dilate on the moral and ethical issues that revolve around this highly talked about and diabolical term "plagiarism", and its colossal negative impact upon those who regard ethics and morals above all other things in life.

Research published in biomedical journals must be impeccable and held to the loftiest standards imaginable. This is what the readership is interested in and looking for. Over the years I have noticed that some researchers out of sheer love for research end up in publishing their original work. These are the ones who are the real research workers and should not only be provided financial grants and other amenities but also be held in great esteem. However, there are others whom we can call as the so called researchers undertake such research projects or get engaged in scientific projects for the purposes of promotions and earning the flattering designations of professorship and associate professorship. It is this latter class of faculty staff who render their work for publication in renowned journals simply to score literary and scholastic points, and once those points are achieved and the desired goals attained, they bid farewell to the noble task of research and divert their attention and energies to other lucrative pursuits of economic gains. To earn their goals of promotion to higher ranks in their own departments, they many a times adopt means that are unbecoming of a faculty staff. To see their names in reputed journals as authors, corresponding authors or co-authors, they utilize the help, or to be more exact, exploit the potential capabilities of their own graduates, residents and postdoctoral fellows and thereby trample the moral and ethical codes. At times, such supervisors go to the extent of coercing their postdoctoral fellows to provide two or more research proposals and submit them as papers after a sham research work has been con-

ducted. If the supervisors play a significant role in the research project and preparation of the manuscript, then their names and that of the other authors should be listed and appropriately placed depending on the principal author's discretion. However, if the so called supervisor's role is trivial and simply ceremonial, then the names of all the authors should be listed according to the rules and regulations enacted by international ethical committees. Such mandatory involvement of a trainee under sheer harassment and obligatory mentioning of the ghost supervisors as first authors has inflicted a great harm to our research enterprises, and has by and large propelled the research teams to go for more easy options and thus get tempted to blatantly conduct plagiarism falsification and fabrication of their data. So long as these unethical and ugly demeanors are not taken notice of, the entire team and specially the supervisors (those who finally turn out to be the first authors or the corresponding authors without contributing a bit) who are the real benefactors of such research enterprises would ultimately achieve their nefarious goals.

When research work is conducted with the ultimate aim of acquiring prestigious curriculum vitae, higher academic and university titles, and lofty goals of research such as disseminating knowledge, are trampled, then the universal propagation of real and true data becomes defeated, and dishonesty and unscrupulous tactics come in and take their place. This ushers in the unanimously detested traits of plagiarism, fabrication, and falsification. A close scrutiny of scientific papers containing fraudulent material is probably as low as 0.02% and extremely difficult to detect (1). Many fabricated and falsified data may go unnoticed despite the fact that a police force in the form of the astute peer review board goes through the text gingerly with hawkish eyes. Although the percentage of such papers is low, but the stark reality is that it does exist. Journals and universities can help in uprooting this menace but they too have not responded well and in stringent language (2), and at times fail to exhibit the will to investigate misconduct allegations. It is an established fact that presenting a

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\*Corresponding Author: Zahid Hussain Khan

Department of Anesthesiology, Imam Khomeini Medical Center, School of Medicine, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran  
Tel: +98 21 66910070, Fax: +98 2166438634, E-mail: kxanzh51@yahoo.com

scholarly and scientific paper for publication is indeed a hard task and an arduous undertaking. When I say hard, I really mean it because it entails a great deal of energy and time besides requiring a substantial control over the English language. In order to circumvent these obstacles and impediments, the novice and the trickier is enticed and lured to choose the terrain with the least hurdles and to cleverly maneuver and take portions of other's text and copy paste it in his own manuscript. This is what is traditionally called as plagiarism. Personally I go even further and call it professional theft in biological sciences and to me this unethical behavior is far worse and detestable than a highway robbery. How can one take a portion of somebody's written text which has taken that particular person for that particular research months and perhaps years of toil and sleepless nights to get it published? Is it a human act? Is it allowable by internationally accepted laws and regulations laid down for international publications? Shall we allow such transgressors to continue such flagrant offences in the noble task of research with total impunity, and allow them to laugh at the medical community in general and at us as the officialdom in particular because it is us whom they cheated for we published their work, and it is us who helped them getting promoted to higher ranks of associate professorship, professorship and other ladders of distinction?

What should we do who in one way or the other are directly or indirectly concerned with their publication which has turned out to be and officially declared as a plagiarized publication?

Shall we leave it unnoticed and let the architect and perpetrator of such plagiarized publication free without any sanctions and thereby allow him/her to further flourish such misconduct and repeat such abhorable offences in future? Or shall we take due and full notice of this unethical misconduct and punish the researcher by retracting his article, withdrawing his grant or obstructing him future research grants, withdrawing his promotion, or else go to the extent of demoting him? Such sanctions if implemented in toto would go a long way in bringing an end to such unethical means of achieving and acquiring academic distinctions by simple, easy and unscrupulous means. Attaining professional laurels in research is a daunting task, and producing papers of international validity and reliability needs persistent and constant endeavors. These struggles coupled with intellectual integrity and impeccable honesty in presenting the data as they are without the least machinations, alterations or modifications would enable the researcher to reach the zenith of perfection. An alternative or short cut to

achieving perfection is doomed to fail and would tarnish the reputation of the so called researcher. Papers of scientific validity and undoubted originality are not and cannot be prepared overnight. Their preparation involves a great deal of labor, and papers of lasting impression and a global impact perhaps need a life long struggle on the part of the researcher and his team. Personally I feel that researchers and investigators regard each one of their papers as their personal asset and their own baby because they catered for them and fostered them, and under no circumstances would ever like them or parts of them to be reproduced illegally without the publishers or their own written permission. Even if you being the writer and owner of a paper want to reproduce part of the text of the paper that you had once written and published, you cannot do so unless you rephrase that part of the text earmarked by you, and finally reference it to comply with the regulations advocated in the international guidelines for publication. It should be noted also that reproduction of any part of the text including tables and figures certainly necessitates permission of the author and the publishers.

A question arises as to whether the co-authors be exonerated or should they be held accountable as accomplices in the fraudulent game. Even in a football game, the rule of law prevails and those who play foul are strictly reprimanded or else depending upon the severity of the foul play shown a red card and expelled from the ground. An expulsion of a single player inflicts a stirring blow on the entire team and it could lead to a defeat. This is how the board of editors or the board of referees ensures that the players strictly abide by the rules laid down and adhere to the policy, and are always on the watch that under no circumstances are these rules and regulations trespassed. To conclude, I quote the example of a partridge that tries to hide its head in snow with the false and deceptive imagination that it cannot be sighted by a hunter. The same example applies to an author who falsifies or fabricates data and at the same time plagiarizes text on the erroneous assumption and deceptive thought that it would evade the eyes of the editors and the readers. No matter how adept you are in successful fakery, you are bound to be sighted and taken to task.

## References

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