Plagiarism

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The act of plagiarizing is defined as: “To take ideas, writings, etc., from another and pass them off as one's own” [1]. It includes copying the text (of others) without a proper reference or citation. Authors have always been copying other authors, sometimes with serious consequences for the plagiarizer and also for the scientific literature. The recent availability of huge amounts of electronic text has made plagiarism much easier while at the same time also easier to discover by means of plagiarism software. In a recent case, the thesis of The German Secretary of Defence was withdrawn from the University of Bayreuth because of plagiarism. It was documented that out of 393 pages, 270 contained copied text and all together 20% of this thesis was plagiarized. More than 30,000 scientists protested in a letter and subsequently the Secretary of Defence resigned.

Plagiarism may be refined in terms of “word-switch” or “sentence rearrangement” or even more complex forms in terms of “metaphor, style, organizational and idea” plagiarism which is more difficult to spot [2]. Plagiarism (copying from others) is publication misconduct and should be addressed accordingly [3].

Self-plagiarism (text recycling) is less well defined, and there is a distinction between self-plagiarism of original research and review material. Republishing large parts of an original research paper is redundant or duplicate publication. Publishing separate parts of the same study with near identical introduction and methods section in different journals is so-called salami publication [4]. Whether it is misconduct depends on the extent of the duplicate text and

author circumstances [5]. In special cases the amount of data may justify more than one publication or may legitimize recycling of specific parts of a research paper such as a methods section. The key issue is deception. Thus, recycling text requires loyal reference to the source of the data and the involved editors must be fully informed. “Few editors will knowingly republish a paper that contains large parts of previously published material and few readers will happily read the same material several times in different journals” [4].

Determining what constitutes plagiarism may be tricky, and there is no international consensus as to the fraction of material that can be legitimately reused between papers. To help editors resolve these cases, some journals set an upper limit for the amount of text that can be reused, usually about 30% [6].

Some journals, e.g., *The Lancet*, have decided to check all manuscripts for plagiarism by using special plagiarism detection software (e.g., CrossCheck powered by iThenticate tool [5]). The *International Urogynecology Journal* relies on the vigilance of the editors and referees to spot salami publication or plagiarism but also has access to software to detect plagiarized texts.

The *International Urogynecology Journal* has not decided on the amount of text which may be recycled but makes a decision about accepting a paper on a case-by-case basis. The Committee on Publications Ethics (COPE) is currently drawing up a discussion paper on text recycling when discovered by CrossCheck [5].

When plagiarized text is discovered, a high level of suspicion is in order to look for other forms of inappropriate scientific behaviour such as falsification of the accompanying data (i.e., alterations of data) or fabrication (i.e., making up data). There are statistical methods for investigating these suspicions [7].

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Actions

If plagiarism is suspected, the flowchart of COPE should be followed which implies two steps: (1) editorial staff will initiate an investigation and (2) the authors will be contacted and given an opportunity to address the issue [3]. If the initial suspicion is confirmed, there are two possibilities:

1. If self-plagiarism is discovered, the authors may be asked to revise the paper including quotation marks etc. or the editors might decide in more extensive cases to reject the paper and contact the authors' head of institution.
2. If plagiarism (copying from others) has been proven, this may result in implementation of the following methods including, but not limited to:
 - (a) If the article is still under consideration, it may be rejected and returned to the authors.
 - (b) If the article has already been published online, depending on the severity of the infraction, either an erratum will be placed beside the article or in severe cases, complete withdrawal of the article will occur. A copy of this letter may also be sent to the head of the respective institute/university.

- (c) The author may be barred from submitting or publishing their results of any future studies for a period from 2 years to life.

Proven plagiarism should be exposed and bring a notice in the journal. Furthermore editors-in-chief of other journals may be informed by the incident and of the action taken by the journal.

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