

# Ethics in Science: Are We Losing the Moral High Ground?

In the competitive world of academia, a person's worth is often ostensibly gauged by one's scientific contribution, wherein the 'article count' has become the simplistic measure of this contribution. The number and frequency of publications reflect an academic's stature in the scientific community and hence the race to publish and increase this 'article count' has become an end unto itself. Sadly though, the overriding desire to publish sometimes defeats the very purpose of scientific contribution as, not unsurprisingly, even the learned may cheat.

The attractions for people to cheat are too sizable for authors to not succumb to them, and for editors to not notice. Of late, this issue has weighed heavily with the editors of the *Saudi Journal of Gastroenterology* (SJG). This issue of the Journal was scheduled to bring out a review article on the subject of antimicrobial hepatotoxicity. Although the article cleared the peer-review process without difficulty, it was at the later stage of editorial proofing where it was discovered that the article was a carbon reproduction from two different articles published elsewhere.

Similarly, another recent submission was deemed to be in breach of the standard publishing policy of the Journal. The submitted study was largely a fattened version of previously published data on pancreatic disease in human immunodeficiency virus patients. Roughly, three-fourths of the work had already been reported and the incremental data provided by the remainder was not sufficiently different, with the authors arriving at more-or-less similar conclusions as in their earlier publication. Such redundant publications are not only unethical, but may actually impinge on eventual copyright, fragment the scientific record, and distort the results of future meta-analyses.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the field of medicine, where we are concerned with human lives and health, a lack of ethical decision-making may have potentially grave and unwanted outcomes.<sup>[2]</sup> Fraudulent practice in research benefits none but the author of such research. Moreover, it may deny credit to the one who rightfully deserves it. Is not the scientific community expected to be above and beyond the corruption that plagues the rest of the publishing world? Where is the honesty, the integrity, and the trustworthiness that are meant to be the founding principles of our profession? Certainly, a fair majority of research is conducted properly and reported honestly.<sup>[3]</sup> However, there is a dishonest minority - not just in our region, but also in the rest of the world. Only a few years ago, a report estimated that 40% of systematic reviews encounter duplicate publishing.<sup>[1]</sup> Likewise, an anonymous survey of 3234 National Institute of Health-funded researchers revealed that 1.4% of the

researchers admitted to plagiarism and 4.7% to multiple publications of the same data.<sup>[4]</sup>

Recently, the British Medical Journal ran an exposé on the plagiaristic tendencies of Asim Kurjak, a Croatian academic.<sup>[5]</sup> The case made sordid headlines within research circles, and the exposed plagiarism of this particular author resonated far and wide in the international arena.<sup>[6,7]</sup> It remains to be seen whether the implications of advertising such cases will reawaken the latent conscience of the publishing community.

Cheating in science must be addressed, and most emphatically in its entirety. The Kurjak case is certainly not an isolated one. Increasing reports of duplicate publishing, verbatim plagiarism, or an ignorance of the often-muddled rules on cheating by authors, has prompted an ever-growing list of journals to decry this "scourge." Adding to the list this year is an editorial in *Liver International* that laments the defiling of scholastic integrity.<sup>[8]</sup> Last year, the editor-in-chief of the *World Journal of Gastroenterology*, while addressing a plagiarized article, tendered an open apology to its readers and sacked the responsible scientific editor.<sup>[9]</sup>

The *SJG* shall be no different. We intend to deal with the matter in the sternest manner possible. The academic institutions of the concerned authors will be informed. A similar message will go out to other editors and certainly, the authors will be barred from publishing in *SJG* again. Our article submission site now hosts a plagiarism detection tool specifically designed to weed out suspicious articles. It shall not be business as usual, but we certainly aim to show that we mean business!

The time for complacency is truly over. Cheating in scientific publication has risen to become a real danger, and threatens to destroy the very core of the principles that embody our profession. The role of academic institutions is imperative in instilling the ethics of scientific integrity within medical students, academics, and researchers. In this context, the role of the editors, journals, and affiliated institutions becomes all the more valid and immediate. The immoral and unethical burden of a plagiarized article rests both on the author and on the editor who allows its publication. Burying our collective heads in the sand and pretending that the problem does not exist will only worsen the problem.

Having said all this, the task ahead is not an easy one. For instance, plagiarism has many different definitions depending on who is writing the definition and who is reading

it.<sup>[10]</sup> What is cheating for one may be 'legitimate adoption' for another. And in the world of research, there are both sins of omission and commission. In this context, the authors of the first article submitted to *SJG* simply penned something that rightfully belonged to others. It was a deliberate attempt at riding on the accolades of someone else's work. On the other hand, the authors of the second article may have stood some chance of being published, had they not 'omitted' to cite their own previous publication.

Publication of fraudulent research is intrinsically dishonest and may ultimately harm patients. This awareness must be heightened, both in authors and editors. For a journal to truly succeed, it is the morality within scientific research that must first triumph.

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