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Commentary letter

Medical researchers in non-English countries and concerns about unintentional plagiarism

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In the area of publishing ethics, plagiarism is addressed in all scholarly disciplines as a major academic fraud which poses a threat to the validity and reliability of published works (1). Plagiarism is a hard to define term frequently used in the literature; however, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defined it as "to copy another person's ideas, words or work and pretend that they are your own" (2). In most cases of plagiarism, a kind of dishonesty to mislead readers can be identified (3); but most students are confused about its exact meaning. Actually, they are not efficiently skillful in correctly summarizing, paraphrasing and citing the original resources. Clearly, we concern about the unintentional plagiarism by young researchers who are not familiar with strategies to avoid plagiarism but require publishing their original works or ideas in other languages than their native language (4). The problem is particularly significant in countries where the researchers, for the promise of the promotion, were compelled by the academic institutes to publish their papers in reputable English journals, whereas English is not their first language. Lacking sufficient abilities in writing skills, the young scholars may feel frustrated and unable to transform their original ideas into perfectly acceptable written works. They may subsequently learn from the peers either to use internet to commit a simple cut and paste crime or to employ a word processing superficially to convert the mechanics of the other's works into a new paper (5).

It is hard to estimate how extensive the problem is; however, the increase in Internet use has made the academic dishonesty especially in its cyber-cheating form (i.e., cut and paste plagiarism) easier than ever (6). Evidences from literature suggest that there is a significant relation between the increased use of technology in academic education and plagiarism (7). In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature concerning the seriousness of this academic fraud. Using plagiarism detection software in a 2005 study on the prevalence of plagiarism among medical students identified committing plagiarism

by 91% of the subjects (8). A large and growing body of literature has also attempted to investigate the increase in the occurrence of plagiarism among medical groups (7- 11). One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether the plagiarism is a serious matter in medical education. Gaberson KB (1997) is among the scholars who pointed out the academic dishonesty as a potential threat to the professional practice among medical practitioners (10). Ten years later, Harper MG (2006) considered the academic dishonesty as a predictor of workplace dishonesty and professional misconduct (7). One major criticism of previous discussion is that main expectation from medical practitioners is not being creative in academic skills but being knowledgeable and expert in their profession (11). However; it is unquestionable that careers will be damaged by detecting plagiarism and other ethical misconducts.

Recently we have conducted a training course on research methodology for a group of physicians, all of which were the staffs of a blood transfusion center in Iran. In this four-week workshop program, the participants learnt how to prepare high quality research proposals in order to overcome their stated problems through systematic research. They successfully prepared 10 research proposals based on the format given by research center of Iranian Blood Transfusion Organization. The assessments indicated a positive attitude towards research activities among the workshop participants. Meanwhile, we found them having strong desire to see their works published in English language journals. Unfortunately their perceived knowledge of English writing as well as the respective self-efficacy was assessed low. Putting all these together with their zero Knowledge of the strategies to avoid plagiarism and their capabilities in this regard, we are concerned about how to keep these future scientists away from unintentional plagiarism. It is suggested to avoid plagiarism by employing a combination of measures such as explicit warning, using plagiarism detection software, disseminating knowledge and improving the academic and writing skills (7, 8, 12). We believe that a kind of obligatory course in avoiding plagiarism is inevitable, and proves helpful. This can be done by disseminating awareness and knowledge about this serious ethical misconduct. Serving the young authors with an online discussion forum moderated by a native English expert in academic writing may improve the quality of English-written works and strengthening the skills of avoiding plagiarisms.

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