

The plagiarism menace

With the rapid advancement of science, there has been a phenomenal increase in output in the form of publications in all scientific disciplines, particularly in the biomedical field. Unfortunately, there has also been a concomitant increase in unethical practices that include plagiarism (publishing writings that have substantial overlap in contents with those of others, including verbatim reproduction of the text), duplicate publication (publishing one's own data already published in another journal), and misrepresentation of data by plain and simple manipulation tantamount to fraud. It does not need superhuman intelligence to realize that such activities are highly wasteful and unethical, and an anathema to everything that science stands for. They have the dubious advantage of temporarily beefing up one's bio-data and this may be one of the motivating factors that drive those who indulge in such practices. With tenure, grants, and awards on the line, it is a temptation that some may find irresistible. This headache for editors, reviewers, heads of institution and granting agencies has been highlighted in several editorials that have appeared in many journals as well as in newspaper articles.

Whereas in the past, discovery was accidental in most cases, concerted efforts are on to formalize the process of detection of malpractice in publications. One such successful venture is the recent creation of a database appropriately named Déjà vu¹, that has assembled (after careful curation of over 60,000 publications from Medline for text match) manuscripts that have a substantial overlap. The database is available free at <http://spore.swmed.edu/dejavu>. The same group has also put together a citation-matching tool named eTBLAST, to scan any publication for a possible text match; this is also available free at <http://invention.swmed.edu/etblast>. Together, they are likely to be a boon to editors and reviewers, allowing them to screen suspicious manuscripts. It is another issue though when they have to deal with articles that have already been published and proven to be duplicates.

An extraordinary recent case of this kind involves the publication of a substantial number of allegedly plagiarized papers in several journals by a chemistry professor of Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupathi.

When I had obtained information about the site, the first name that I typed in was my own. To my great horror, it picked up six pairs of citations of apparently duplicate publications, which on closer examination turned out to involve my namesakes with different initials. One of them was the legitimate reproduction of a medical report involving public health information published in two journals. A greater shock awaited me when I entered a name that was discussed widely in the pages of *Current Science* last year, primarily as a test of the veracity of the database. Two pairs of citations were picked up. The first pair appeared to be legitimate, consisting of an original paper in one journal and a review article by the same group in another journal on the same theme. The second pair of publications was more alarming since it appeared to be a clear case of duplicate publications by the same group. The first paper² was published in 2004 and the second³ in 2006. What was not apparent from the site without further browsing was the fact that the second paper had already been withdrawn from the journal precisely due to prior publication. The journal that published the 2006 paper had a bland erratum in fine print in 2007, stating 'This article was withdrawn due to prior publication in an alternate publication by the authors'. It does not state who withdrew the paper, the authors or the journal. Shockingly, however, the erratum gives a link to the 2006 paper and one is able to view the full text, without any indication that the paper had been withdrawn. This information can be found only by chance. It appears that many journals also do not wish to take the responsibility for making a mistake. Incidentally, the 2004 paper² was part of the controversy discussed at length in *Current Science* last year. The group was accused of misconduct and later exonerated of using part of the data in that

paper to represent different sets of conclusions in another publication⁴ in 2005, which was subsequently withdrawn by the journal. Interestingly, the withdrawal of the 2006 paper happened when the controversy was raging in the pages of *Current Science* and found no mention anywhere at that time. As on 21 February 2008, the official NCCS website continues to include both withdrawn papers among its list of publications.

The purpose of this write-up is not to point fingers at any individual. It is born out of a frustration of not being able to accept the fact that we in India have no formal mechanism to address such issues. What is to be done if we discover an unethical act? Whom do we approach? Whistle-blowers are exposed, their confidentiality violated. Independent watchdog organizations are accused of ulterior motives and maligned. Our science academies are mute spectators during most of these discussions. There appears to be a great desire for damage control rather than getting to the bottom of the issues and resolving them fairly. This is in stark contrast to what happens elsewhere, including our Asian neighbour Korea. The ability of the Indian scientific community to institute fair and transparent mechanisms to handle allegations of scientific misconduct will be a measure of its maturity. Where are the Luke Skywalkers, Princess Leias and Han Solos of Indian science?

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2. Rangaswami, H. *et al.*, *J. Biol. Chem.*, 2004, **279**, 38921–38935.
3. Rangaswami, H. *et al.*, *Glycoconj. J.*, 2006, **23**, 221–232.
4. Rangaswami, H. *et al.*, *J. Biol. Chem.*, 2005, **280**, 19381–19392.

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