

## Ethical Dilemmas in Publishing. A Rising Tide of Plagiarism?

A year ago, a *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) article blared the headline “Mistakes in Scientific Studies Surge.” The WSJ had commissioned a study from Thomson Reuters. The study showed “a steep rise” in retraction notices, from 22 in 2001 to 339 in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Although 339 articles out of the hundreds of thousands of articles published each year might represent a miniscule percent, it is still an alarming trend. Although some of these were retracted because of ethical misconduct, many were because of simple plagiarism.

Sadly, no one, not even the *Journal of Prosthodontics*, is immune to the problem.

Until a few months ago, I had the luxury of reading such an article secure in the knowledge that the *Journal of Prosthodontics* had never published plagiarized material. Unfortunately, in April, it was brought to our attention that an article published more than 5 years ago had used several entire paragraphs from other previously published articles. Because allegations of plagiarism are serious, we are methodically and carefully investigating this claim. Although I cannot share details with you until our investigation is complete, I believe that you may see an error notice, or even a retraction of the published manuscript, in the coming months.

The drivers behind this rising plagiarism trend are many. For one, cut and paste features in word processing programs make copying others’ work much easier than ever before. Downloadable software even facilitates converting PDF files to Word documents for easy access. When you are trying to express a complicated sentiment, it is tempting and very easy to copy the work of someone who has already made your point for you. Although there is no harm in using another’s words, appropriate attribution (and quotes when quoting word for word) is nonnegotiable.

A second driver behind the rising tide of plagiarism is the explosion in submitted and published manuscripts. Our journal, for instance, is on track to receive over 500 manuscripts this year, when as recently as 2003, we only received 65. Although it may be easy to spot duplicative tests and research, being able to identify copied explanations within the Introduction or Discussion section of a manuscript is much more difficult—no one has committed all published research to memory.

Finally, cultural differences contribute to rising plagiarism concerns. In some cultures, it is expected that works will be quoted directly, and simply referencing copied work (but not placing it within quotations) is acceptable. From 2005–2010, the countries with the greatest increase in manuscript submissions (from ScholarOne Manuscripts’ database of over 300,000 submissions) were China, India, and Iran.<sup>2</sup> These are all countries whose ideas about what constitutes plagiarism is markedly different from our own interpretation.

It is important to educate these scholars on our standards, instead of outright accusing them of unethical work. Therefore,

our Author Guidelines provide a definition of plagiarism. We use this as our standard when considering what we will publish and what we will consider for publication. Our definitions come directly from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines, and I will cite (and quote) them properly:

The *Journal of Prosthodontics* defines major plagiarism as any case involving: “unattributed copying of another person’s data/findings, or resubmission of an entire publication under another author’s name (either in the original language or in translation); or verbatim copying of >100 words of original material in the absence of any citation to the source material; or unattributed use of original, published, academic work, such as the structure, argument or hypothesis/idea of another person or group where this is a major part of the new publication and there is evidence that it was not developed independently.”<sup>3</sup>

“Minor plagiarism is defined as verbatim copying of <100 words without indicating that these are a direct quotation from an original work (whether or not the source is cited), unless the text is accepted as widely used or standardized (e.g., the description of a standard technique); or close copying (not quite verbatim, but changed only slightly from the original) of significant sections (e.g., >100 words) from another work (whether or not that work is cited).”<sup>3</sup>

It is possible to consider the bright side of these numbers. As Cliff Morgan, Vice President, Planning and Development Director at Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, has noted, “Such figures may indicate not so much an increase in transgression but an increase in detection, in the establishment of codes of practice and ethical guidelines, in the use of plagiarism-detecting software, such as Cross Check, and in due process.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the *Journal of Prosthodontics* incorporated the use of CrossCheck iThenticate plagiarism detection software into our review and publication process in January 2011. We randomly check submitted manuscripts prior to beginning the review process, and we check EVERY accepted manuscript prior to publication. How does the system work? Manuscripts are uploaded to the site, and then checked against more than 31 million articles previously published in 70,000+ scholarly journals.<sup>5</sup>

CrossCheck iThenticate is an incredibly sensitive system! It requires some human intervention to overlook the computer’s sensitivity. Almost every manuscript comes back with some plagiarized work. Alarmed? Don’t be. There’s really only one way to say, “Within the limitations of the current study, the following conclusions can be drawn.” But, if it’s been published before, iThenticate will catch it, and let us know. Don’t worry, you do not need to come up with a new way to list your conclusions. The phrase above is one we are willing to overlook. You should also know that we allow a little more leeway in the Materials and Methods section, given that testing methods are often very similar.

What have we found in the year and a half since we've incorporated the system into our process? Of the 125 randomly selected submitted manuscripts, 16 (13%) have included passages we have found questionable. Note that I did not call this "plagiarism." Most instances have included maybe one or two copied paragraphs out of a 15-page manuscript. And in most of these cases, when the authors have been informed about our definition of plagiarism, they have responded positively, corrected their articles, and resubmitted.

We have also uploaded 132 accepted manuscripts to the iThenticate system. These manuscripts have completed the peer review process and have been given the seal of approval from our reviewers and editors. Of these, only seven (5%) have given us pause. Again, we have given the authors the opportunity to revise and reword the questionable material. If they cannot adequately do so, we will not publish their work.

I can also tell you that the plagiarism issue we are currently investigating would have rung alarm bells long before publication if we had been using the CrossCheck program at the time it was accepted for publication.

It is important to me, as it should be for all of you, that the *Journal of Prosthodontics* only publishes the finest, most original prosthodontic research. Plagiarism is unfair to our readers,

our authors, our reviewers, and perhaps even your patients, whose treatment may be predicated on published research. I hope you will agree.

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*Managing Editor*

## References

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