

Word theft

They're mine! Well, I think they are mine, but actually the copyright technically belongs to the publisher. What are they? They are the words I write and publish—the words in this editorial. Of course, most of the time no one would want them. But on occasion, the words I write, or the photographs I painstakingly make of technical or clinical procedures and display at lectures or in publications, are deemed worthy of being put in someone else's lecture or publication. That's fine if I know about it. But it hurts when they are stolen.

Plagiarism is an ugly word. It means taking someone else's words and ideas and presenting them as your own. In other words, word theft. An academic thief lifted one of my passages published in *Clark's Clinical Dentistry* some years back. The plagiarized passage was taken word for word from my chapter on pit and fissure sealants. I suppose it could have been an honest error—but maybe the word thief gambled that no one would remember the origins of "his" writing, which I had published 10 years ago.

I suppose I should be flattered. But while it may be flattering to be quoted properly, it is anger and disappointment that surface when one becomes the victim of plagiarism. The new "writer" has taken something I created and passed it off as his own work. His own idea. *His*. But it's mine.

This is not about sharing. Obviously anyone who publishes anything in our field wants to share knowledge with professional colleagues. No, this is about honesty and intellectual fairness. It's about ethics. And it's about being a good citizen of our professional world.

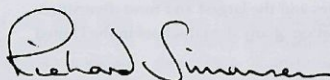
Theft of intellectual property has happened to me several times over the past years, as I am sure it has to many of you. In fact, it has probably happened many more times than you or I know about because who can remember what they wrote years ago word for word? The only reason I could identify the above example was that I had written about a system I had devised. It was a system

for deciding which teeth to seal and which not to seal based on a triage of categories. The system was copied and thus easily identified.

In another personal example, a colleague from Europe published a textbook in which he used a couple of scanning electron micrographs (SEMs) from a book I published in 1978. Now for me these were not just any old SEMs. As a young university faculty member at the University of Minnesota in the 1970s, I had proudly completed every step from preparing the specimens, mounting them and coating them, to operating the SEM. So when they appeared several years later in another textbook without so much as an indication that readers were looking at anything but the author's own work, I was upset. I wrote to the author who, amazingly, claimed they were *his* SEMs. After I pointed out that the same SEMs were in my book, he then claimed they were given to him by a third party. I can only hope that from this embarrassing experience (of being discovered as a thief) he learned to be more careful. I would hope that he routinely now credits his sources when using borrowed material. However, it seems to me that once the golden rule of publishing is betrayed, it is probably much easier to break it again.

To anyone who has had a reference or a quotation mark denoting someone else's words accidentally dropped in the long process of publishing, let's be more vigilant in preventing errors that can be mistaken for plagiarism. Word theft is ugly.

Sharing ideas is noble. Stealing them is not.



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