

Plagiarism

What is the big deal about plagiarism? After all, isn't imitation the sincerest form of flattery? When it comes to imitation, is there anything better than directly copying the work of others and claiming it as your own?

Can you hear me choking as I try to swallow this comment with a rather large grain of salt? I hope you can, because I want to make it abundantly clear that claiming someone else's work as your own is nothing but stealing, and, like stealing, it cannot be tolerated.

A few years ago, I described the use of a new software program, iThenticate, that JOMI is using to help identify plagiarism. It goes like this: When an article is submitted to the journal, it triggers an electronic review of the existing literature on this topic. The software then compares the previous publications with the recent submission. If there is similarity between the new submissions and the older articles, a risk of plagiarism is identified.

This is when we ask ourselves if a risk of plagiarism is the same as plagiarism. Indeed, similarity is a potential risk factor, but the software evaluates the volume of repeated text to establish a limit that cannot be exceeded. For JOMI, this limit is 25% similarity.

Is plagiarism the same as the performance of a similar study? What happens when an individual begins on a specific path of research but then abandons that path for one reason or another? What if that researcher published a preliminary study but then moves into another line of research? It could be a lack of funding, a lack of time, or a lack of interest. Regardless, another investigator could be acquainted with this research, and this exposure to the idea could be the spark that ignites the enthusiasm to develop a very similar research question and move forward with a similar investigation. Does this constitute plagiarism?

What if an individual describes a specific line of research to their colleagues, only to have those colleagues perform virtually identical research? In essence, the situation went from concept to reality, but the reality came from a different investigational team. Is this plagiarism?

Well, these scenarios are unlikely to represent plagiarism. Performance of a similar study, a follow-up study, or a study based upon existing research will be

plagiarism only if the subsequent study fails to credit, in the form of a reference to the original idea. When appropriate references are not provided, articles are rejected. Likewise, accumulated similarity of more than 25% results in article rejection.

The reality is that plagiarism is not an acceptable behavior but that it is also a difficult one to identify with certainty. When a journal suspects that plagiarism has occurred, such an observation would need to be reported to the academic institution that is home to the plagiarist. There is little doubt that such an action would lead to a strong reaction on the part of the parent institution and could result in termination.

The rules defining plagiarism are often difficult to understand. With a harsh response to the potential act of plagiarism, I am confident that you would agree that the best solution is to avoid the problem, and this would be accomplished by provision of appropriate documentation of references throughout an article. Further, the avoidance of direct quotations without references must be the rule rather than the exception.

Indeed, JOMI has experienced this problem. Before iThenticate, the only line of defense that a publisher had was the memory of the reviewers, editorial staff, and readers of the journal that would help identify events of plagiarism. With computer software, the situation has improved, but vigilant observation is still required.

Realistically, it is possible to identify these concerns, but it is difficult to guarantee that they are removed entirely. When it occurs, the plagiarist should understand that action from the publisher would be swift. Parent institutions have a strong history of aggressive reactions, giving the offending party little recourse beyond attempting to re-establish their careers from the bottom up, most often with little sympathy being shown from the academic community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven E. Eckert DDS MS".

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