

Anecdote from Editors Desk

Anecdote 3- Duplication and Theft

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The following anecdote took place about couple of years back.

It was an interesting case of **Con being Conned**.

We received an interventional study (article A/author A) from a reputed medical college, authored by senior faculties. Initial screening was done; work found eligible for peer review, was assigned to a set of reviewers. Reviewers were chosen from the Journal's set of reviewers and by invitation to academicians. In this case both were medical practitioners as well as academicians (reviewer of many journals, editorial board member of national and international journals).

Couple of weeks later, one of the reviewer responded with a positive note for the article. Review report from the second reviewer was awaited.

Another submission (article B/author B) came from a private hospital based researcher. The article was assigned to a different in-house editor. At the stage of initial screening for the article B, the journal database showed same title with two Unique Identification numbers. The two editors (in charge of the articles) corresponded with each other and flagged both. To our surprise, it was found that this whole draft was a verbatim match with the other one. In the article B, the study duration was not specified in terms of months-year neither was the ethical committee approval number provided. The copyright in this article, however, did not belong to JCDR. The study institution name in the title file was same as that stated in methodology section of the article. All the areas wherein the submitting author had to fill particulars of ethical statement, patient consent, author details were filled; so much so that a non suspecting eye would not find anything amiss. The article was submitted as a single author study.

Then came the moment of truth! The author of the article B was the reviewer who was assigned article A for review. The date when the author B submitted article B and the review report for article A were same. Author B did some editing to own the article, before submission. At this point of time, the editorial was sure that the reviewer breached her (yes, a lady!) line of responsibility. She stole the article and planned to submit it as her own work in some other journal. As luck would have it, by mistake she logged into the JCDR account and submitted it. That explains the copyright form of another journal being tagged along with the submission.

The editorial planned to process article A as usual; the necessary actions against author B were also on the way. The day after the second review report arrived, the feedback was compiled and the in-house detailed review was started. The first step was to look for presence of similar research works in literature. One particular title came up that matched the article A theme and was authored by the same group of researchers. Since it was not an open access article, the editor mailed author A asking for the full draft and demanded a justification. The mail

was replied next day; author vaguely explained the differences between the two papers. The editor in-charge analysed the two works and found them to be same. There were some minor changes in the textual content, but the research question, study population, data set etc were all same. Thus came into light the second con.

The Editor-in-chief was informed about this new disclosure. It was immediately decided that both the articles would be rejected without any delay. The author B was struck off from the reviewer list. As a final closure of the episode, both the authors were informed about the reason of rejection- attempted duplicate publication and theft of research work. The authors were blacklisted and any further submissions with their names would automatically raise and alarm and appropriate higher authorities were also informed.

We have a clear policy on such issues under data sharing access, sharing policy [1]. When the article is downloaded, the peer reviewer is requested to login and allowed to download the work only if he agrees not to use this work or part of the work for any purpose other than to perform peer review. Peer reviewer can be national or international, may be a regular reviewer of the journal or a first time for the journal. In any case, the peer reviewer has a copy of the article. In practice, peer reviewers hold a reputable position and give their valuable time to review research papers or any literary work. An act, that keeps such scholarly works being vetted before publication. However rarely, they may misuse an article for own nefarious motives. This is condemnable and puts the journal in a very difficult situation. The journal takes this issue very seriously and does all in its power to stop such an act.

Many such reports of duplicate publications, either attempted or later causing retractions, exist in literature. About research theft by reviewers too, literature has abundant such reports. This points towards the fact that peer reviewers are no more the 'guardians'. The ethics, integration of the whole process is under scanner due to some of these self-seeking reviewers. iThenticate reported one such article in 2017, wherein the reviewer rejected one of the submission which later was found to be published in a different journal under the authorship of this particular reviewer. A similar case is published in BMJ 2016 issue. BMJ, however, took a bold stand by publishing the original author's letter naming the reviewer, accompanied by a commentary from the Chief Editor [2,3].

Research publication is full of different types of misconduct and many new ones have come up. Data falsification, gift authorship etc. have become 'obsolete'; the threat from peer reviewers stealing articles seems to be on the rise. The urgent need of the hour is to stop them or at least let them be unmasked. This would help other journals to proceed cautiously. They would know who will fit the role of a reviewer without holding any secrets. This incidence is 'interesting' due to the fact that both the misconducts were associated with the same article.

REFERENCES

[3] <https://www.bmj.com/content/355/bmj.i6768>.

[1] <https://jcdr.net/Policy.asp>.

[2] <http://www.ithenticate.com/plagiarism-detection-blog/when-peer-reviewerssteal#.XhgEa1UzblU>.

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ETYMOLOGY: Editorial

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