

EDITORIAL VIEW

Redefining plagiarism; A friend or a foe?

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SUMMARY

Plagiarism is a universal phenomenon, not strictly restricted to medical writing, but encompassing almost all fields of life. Over a period of time, it has become customary to talk very loudly about it and even condemn it as a sin. A review of the past and present scientific knowledge as well as literature confirms that plagiarism has been and is still in wide practice in developed as well as undeveloped countries. The availability of scientific knowledge on the internet has made it easier to plagiarise as well as to identify plagiarized material. On the other hand much of the research methodology, reviews, discussion parts of original articles and even larger books and monographs do contain parts of copied material from already published material. This editorial review the prevalence of and the measures to control the plagiarism, and stresses a need to draw fresh lines in between good and bad plagiarism.

Key words: Plagiarism; Copyrights; Declaration of Helsinki; Berne Convention; Higher Education Commission

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It may be quite difficult to ascertain the first use of the word ‘plagiarism’, but the Oxford English Dictionary credits Ben Jonson with being the first to use it in print. The form they used was “plagiary,” which is a Latin term for a type of kidnapper or illegitimate slaver.

According to the Wikipedia, plagiarism has its root in the Latin word *plagiarius*, meaning kidnapper, seducer or plunderer. *Plagium* in turn derived from *plaga*, meant kidnapping, to capture or trap. According to Merriam-Webster the word plagiarism means to plagiarize. It is equivalent to stealing some other authors themes, ideas, words or even technology and publish or submit either verbally or in writing without disclosing the original source.

In fact, it has been claimed that the word “plagiarism,” in the sense we use it today, was first used in English in the various battles among Shakespeare and his peers. Plagiarism spread like a plague until first English copyright law had to be passed in 1709, aimed at protecting the rights of publishers against book piracy and protecting the author’s rights against unscrupulous printers.¹ James Boswell was a lawyer who argued one of the important cases over how long copyrights should last for an author and his or her heirs (twenty one years at the time).^{1,3}

By the end of the eighteenth century, the concept and the laws were enforced in most of the developed countries, and even the issue of enforcing copyrights across borders had to be settled through agreements among countries to prevent book piracy, except the United States, who refused to give any protection to foreign authors and publishers until 1891 and didn’t sign on to the Berne Convention until 1988. The Declaration of Helsinki is the universally accepted code of conduct for researchers worldwide.^{2,3} Plagiarism is a universal phenomenon, not strictly restricted to medical writing, but encompassing almost all fields of life. During preparation of this manuscript a search on web yielded a blog and an editorial and it was found that the editorial had liberally consumed the paragraphs from the blog.^{1,4} By all known standards, this editorial is also a dirty example of plagiarism, if using information from the existing knowledge bases may well be termed as plagiarism.

The world of literature and arts is ripe with glaring examples of plagiarism. A blog entitled ‘Great Men Who Built Their Careers on Plagiarism’ by Robert Evans, March 29, 2009, which by 27 July 2012 had 1,081,344 views, on the web depicts some very illustrious examples of plagiarism in literature.⁵

Stephen Ambrose, the historical advisor on Saving Private Ryan, who invented pop history, authored award-winning biographies on Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon, plagiarized the book 'Wings of Morning' by an almost unknown historian named Thomas Childers, for his hit 2001 novel, *The Wild Blue*, which was the account of a different group of B-24 crewmen. Seven of his books were found to contain some degree of plagiarism. His college thesis was found to be loaded with other people's unattributed writing. The most famous historian in the world is now known to have built his career on a foundation of lies and cheating.⁵

T.S. Eliot wrote several great, enduring poems, including one of the most famous one "The Waste Land," the idea behind, and a fair amount of its content, is known to be plagiarized from an almost unknown American poet named Madison Cawein. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's own university admits that his doctoral thesis, the very foundation of his career, was significantly plagiarized. They had an official inquiry but could not recommend he be posthumously stripped of his title, due to Dr. King's incredible services to the world. Dr. Richard Owen, the man who invented dinosaurs, or, at least, the word dinosaur, was one of the first paleontologists in history, as well as a renowned anatomist and biologist. He was also a member of the team responsible for the founding of the British Museum of Natural History. Owen stole credit for the discovery of the Iguanodon, (as well as several others) from Mantell (one of the discoveries for which he was most famous). Later on The Royal Society's Zoological Council fired him for plagiarism.⁵

H.G. Wells, probably most famous for his radio drama *War of the Worlds*, is one of the most influential figures in popular science-fiction. He was also a modern historian. *The Outline of History* and *A Short History of the World* were his best known works of non-fiction, and garnered him a reputation, is an example of his shameless plagiarism. H.G. Wells published his *Outline of History* in 1920, a work with some striking similarities to unpublished 'The Web of the World's Romance' by an unknown, Canadian scholar named Florence Deeks. He had stolen several phrases and stylistic choices from her as well as the most damning several mistakes from it.⁵

Urdu literature is not far behind in this respect. Dr Muhammad Ali Siddiqui, popularly known as Ariel, a critic, columnist and an author of 17 books on Urdu and English literature, expressed his deep concern over plagiarism in Urdu literature according to a news item in Daily The News. Referring to an Urdu book titled "Falsafa Ma Ba'ad Jadeediat" (post-modern philosophy) by a UK-based Pakistani, Shahid Imran Bhandar, which alleged that a renowned Urdu critic of India, Gopi Chand

Narang, had plagiarised a major portion of one of his books from a book of foreign literature while claiming that he had been subscribing to the same philosophical views, Siddiqui said that he had already pointed out such things in Urdu literature and that it was not fair to treat such people as heroes of Urdu literature and genuine critics.⁶

Most of us would be familiar with plagiarism that has been in vogue in the Subcontinent in film and music industry. Sometime back there used to be a serial programme on a Pakistani television network which picked Indian copies of the Pakistani songs and vice versa. Even entire films have been conveniently copied under a different name, without giving a slightest hint or credit.

Coming to fashion industry, yes no immunity is conferred to the fashion designing. Daily newspaper The News noted that 'Fashion designing has the potential of becoming a leading industry in Pakistan if it is freed from the plague of plagiarism. It is spreading due to the hypocritical attitude of big names in the industry that condemn plagiarism but refuse to take action when they can.'⁷

Recently an editorial in *Saudi Journal of Anesthesia (SJA)* pointed out that the journal had published a fraudulent manuscript.⁸ The article described a study performed by Drs. Jaydev Dave and Sandip Vaghela, from the MP Shah Medical College, in Jamnagar, India, assessing the effects of dexmedetomidine and propofol in children undergoing magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanning. The authors had fully copied the data from another paper published earlier in a 2006 manuscript in *Anesthesia and Analgesia* with an identical title by Koroglu and colleagues.⁹

The journal quoted a classic example of plagiarism and fraud by Dr. Trivedi in 2010, of publishing a case report in the Indian Journal of Anesthesia of three patients undergoing continuous cervical epidural for thyroplasty, in which two patients and pictures were confirmed fake and copied from different journals.¹⁰⁻¹²

According to SJA, MP Shah Medical College of India was particularly notorious in this regard, and the journal quoted various other examples.

A literature search on Google displays millions of results about plagiarism and especially medical plagiarism; perhaps the people are more concerned about anything going wrong with medical profession and medical ethics.

In Pakistan scientific plagiarism has repeatedly surfaced during the last decade. On 20 March 2012, a lengthy and detailed news item was published by 'The News' about

the genuineness of a particular research co-supervised by Quaid-i-Azam University's Vice-Chancellor. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) also asked the Department of International Relations to check the theses of M Phil approved during the last two years. The newspaper reported that one student was about to be awarded a gold medal for what was alleged to be a plagiarized thesis.¹³

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan is the prime organization looking after all aspects of higher education. The Commission is very particular about this issue and received 104 plagiarism cases from different stakeholders since 2006, out of which 86 cases have been resolved while 18 are in the process at university or Quality Assurance Division of HEC level. The Plagiarism Policy, circulated by HEC in 2007, provides complete guidance about process of investigation, procedure for constitution of Plagiarism Standing Committee and punishment, etc. Still the cases of plagiarism continue to surface.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

Recently some notables from the Western countries had to step down due to issues of plagiarism, including prime minister of Romania, the president of Hungary and many more.¹⁷

A survey of more than 80 universities has found that academic misconduct is soaring at institutions across the UK, including the prestigious Oxford University, with over 17,000 incidents being recorded during the academic year 2009-2010, with thousands of students caught plagiarising, trying to bribe lecturers and buying essays from the Internet. Greenwich University recorded the largest number of cheating incidents overall, with 916, compared with 540 in 2005-06; Sheffield Hallam had the second largest number with 801 last year, more than 500 of which were for plagiarism. Loughborough University reported 151 incidents last year of which 43 were committed by postgraduates while East London University said that among its 733 cases of cheating last year there were 612 of plagiarism.¹⁸

Plagiarism is wide spread and plagiarism is bad. A number of check and balance systems including some advanced computer software have been introduced, but everyone comes with some inherent shortcomings. Perhaps it is the time that we ask some questions to ourselves;

- Why do people resort to plagiarism?
- Is plagiarism here to stay?
- Can we succeed in eliminating it?
- Is it always harmful? Or is there some type of plagiarism that may be beneficial to the society in the long run?

- Then if we are convinced that the plagiarism is here to stay, isn't it advisable that we redefine the types, the limits, and finally its acceptability and legitimacy with relevance to different geosocial strata of the societies or discipline?

I have not come across a study that has compared the incidence of plagiarism among the countries, or between developed and undeveloped countries, nor have I seen a study that may have comprehensively addressed the etiology of this phenomenon. Perhaps it would have been easier to curb this menace by first understanding its root causes.

Ethical writing? Only a small number of medical institutions in the third world countries have ethical committees. All of the rest either have no committee or no functional committee. Should journals start asking for the written permission (or statement) of the institutional ethical committees?

Plagiarism is here to stay; no doubt about it. The people will continue to seek shortcuts, despite the risk of severe penalties. Can an attempt to eliminate it be successful?

Is it always harmful? Or is there some type of plagiarism that may be beneficial to the society in the long run? This question may seem to be a foolish idea to most of us. Yes it is. Let us examine the most of the present day research studies. The idea, the methodology, some results and major part of the discussion usually comprises of what is already known or has already been published. Internet has expanded the scientific horizon beyond human comprehension. Although new ideas, new findings and new inventions will continue to pour in, the canvas of the scientific writing will continue to comprise mainly of already known or written word. The authors from most of the undeveloped countries are bound to write in English, which is not their mother tongue, and they cannot be expected to be fluent in it. Copying and pasting is the easiest option left for them. Of course they should be advised to modify the language somewhat.

Paraphrasing is the term used for this business, and is accepted as a norm. Can we study this matter more thoroughly to find out once more the limits upto which plagiarism might be acceptable? Can we redefine the term to be based upon the regional dimensions? In 1910, Sir William Osler wrote, "No human being is constituted to know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; and even the best of men must be content with fragments, with partial glimpses, never the full fruition".

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'My Most Memorable Patient'[®]

It was the month of Ramadan, an old aged lady of very thin, rather esthetic build, mother of six, reported for preanesthesia assessment. She was a fragile lady, just skin over skeleton. It was frightening to see her move about. She suffered from a giant sized benign kidney tumour and our brave urologist wanted to excise the growth out. The vital signs of the patient were within normal limits, but I was far from satisfied with her general health. Perhaps we cannot judge every human being by the parameters of body chemical and biological elements. Her abdomen was frighteningly ballooned out by the sheer size of the tumour. Still she could sit, walk, talk and even cook food for his children. So many surgeons had previously refused to operate, declaring the tumour to be non-operable. I was personally not convinced to do it at that very point – in Ramadan – just seven days before Eid-ul-Fitre, and tried to convince her attendants to postpone it till after Eid. She needed to be built up. Due to unknown reasons, they persisted with their earlier decision to get it over.

The surgery went unremarkably smooth, except that massive dissection had to be carried out by the surgeon to isolate and remove the growth, and five pints of whole blood and five pints of fresh frozen plasma were transfused. She recovered smoothly, was extubated and shifted to ICU. Everyone was delighted on the accomplishment of such a heroic surgery. The next morning, on reaching the hospital, I rushed to the ICU to see her. Her bed was empty, even the faces of the morning shift nursing staff gave a blank look. What happened to her? She had undergone sudden cardiac arrest at about midnight from which she could not be revived.

Her pale face and skeleton like body danced before my eyes. Had she not consented for surgery, perhaps she would have remained alive on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitre or even more than that to celebrate the Holy festival of Eid-ul-Adha (two a half months later) with her children.

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