

Catching the Cheats

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Why on earth is the *Green Journal* publishing an article on covert duplicate publication in China?¹ Why does it occur? Who is to blame? And in the jargon of journal editors, is this experience “generalizable”? Finally, and to the point here, what should be done?

In China, inducements to publish are colossal, especially for publications in Western journals. Universities pay cash awards, housing benefits, and, of course, academic advancement.² In the article¹ in this issue of the *Journal*, the incidence of such duplication for an article on Budd-Chiari syndrome is on the order of 10%. “Understandable,” “common in Communist countries,” “who can blame them?” run the comments from the West, and “thank God we don’t have that!”

Don’t we?

Every line item on a curriculum vitae matters greatly in the United States for academic promotion, and the list of publications, especially so. Promotion and the possibility of tenure mean security, further advancement, and better jobs. Life can become appreciably better, and if spin, slant, and “development” can lengthen that list, well, why not? Everybody does it.

Not everybody, but a sufficient number of “reputable” scientists to cause concern. Several thousand early- and mid-career scientists based in the United States and funded by the National Institutes of Health were polled regarding their own behavior.³ Some 5% to 6% admitted to publishing the same data or results in 2 or more publications. Analysis of articles in another study found a similar prevalence.⁴

Of course, covert duplicate publishing is wrong. In the world of useful journal articles, it affects meta-analyses. It is dishonest, unprofessional, and the fault of the individual. That individual is not a victim—not of toilet training, academic pressures (more on this), or mentoring—and no amount of course correction in these issues will resolve the problem.

We may never resolve the problem. But in this area of fraudulent publication, we can catch the cheats, and compared with falsification of data, ignoring major aspects of human-subject requirements, or changes in design as a response to pressure from funding sources, covert duplicate

publication is not that difficult to discover. Although used primarily to catch plagiarism, database programs such as Turnitin may be useful here.⁵ (What is especially disheartening about this cited article by Segal et al⁵ is that those entering medicine are already crossing the line.)

One needs a standard system of exposing this dishonesty, which is uniform, endorsed, and relatively immune from libel suits, especially rampant in the United Kingdom. The Committee on Publication Ethics is an excellent resource with an impressive and lengthy list of members, of which *The American Journal of Medicine* is one.⁶ Beginning with the article’s reviewer, who has researched literature relevant to the article in question (not the journal editor), the Committee on Publication Ethics gives us a flow chart for handling the problem. Article reviewers, when assessing the novelty of an article, should be instructed as well to make a qualitative assessment of duplication of publication. Search and pull the articles published by the author in question, and if you have suspicions of duplication, report it in your review. The journal editor will handle the issue from there, ultimately, if necessary, informing the author’s superior, institution, or funding source. For journal editors, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has published guidelines relating to overlapping publications.⁷ *The American Journal of Medicine* subscribes to these guidelines.

This sort of policing should not be the task solely of medical journals. Academic institutions especially, when screening an applicant’s curriculum vitae, whether for hire or promotion, should look toward the list of publications with an eye toward this dishonesty. Search and promotion committees might do this quite easily. When covert duplicate publication comes into question, asking the candidate what is different between the 2 articles will become a standard part of the interview process.

Not every professional is professional.

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