

(3.1) Self-plagiarism

You oversee a research group that has published a series of articles in peer-reviewed journals over the last six years regarding a novel advanced MR spectroscopy application that your group has developed. A medical student has served a central role in evaluating this technique in a specific clinical setting over the past year and is given the opportunity to write up the findings as a manuscript. You are currently reading through the manuscript draft that the student has prepared. A number of elements within the text strike you as very similar to earlier articles by the research group. You retrieve these articles and perform a side-by-side comparison. You note that there are passages several sentences in length that are nearly identical from earlier articles within the Introduction, Methods, and Discussion sections of the manuscript. You ask the student regarding the similarity in these passages. He remarks that because the same investigators authored these earlier papers, he believed that it was acceptable for the present draft to contain overlapping text. How should you respond to the student?

Commentary

When submitting a manuscript for peer review, authors typically sign an agreement that, effective upon final manuscript acceptance, transfers the copyright to the article to the journal's publisher. Therefore, the publisher, and not the authors themselves, now controls the rights to the article content. While the authors originally wrote the manuscript text, they no longer maintain the authority to re-use this text in future works. Repetition of text that an individual originally drafted but has subsequently provided a copyright transfer is deemed self-plagiarism and is considered author misconduct. When writing later articles on the topic, author should express ideas differently, crafting new language to communicate the information. If choosing to use overlapping text from one's earlier works, then authors should adopt a similar approach as if the text had originated from separate authors. Namely, the re-used text should be marked with quotations and a citation provided to the original source. In addition, permission should be obtained from the copyright holder in the event of a lengthy quotation. There may be a particular risk of self-plagiarism in the Methods section of articles when a research group conducts multiple investigations based on a specific imaging technique developed by the group. In such circumstances, one consideration after initially reporting the technique is to cite the methodology from the group's original paper on the topic, without again describing it in full detail.

Biomedical journals are taking action to respond to growing concerns of self-plagiarism. Software packages such as iThenticate are now available that automatically compare the text of a manuscript with the text of articles within a vast array of biomedical journals to identify redundant text. Such software increases the ease with which journals are able to detect self-plagiarism. Journals may set their own policies to guide decisions regarding detected self-plagiarism, for instance in terms of the extent or nature of overlap deemed permissible. For example, limited overlap within the Methods related to technical details may be allowed given the standardized nature of such text in many circumstances.

In the present case, it would not be acceptable to proceed with submitting the manuscript in the form prepared by the student given the description of apparent self-plagiarism. As lead investigator of the project, you should have previously educated the medical student regarding this issue prior to his beginning to write the manuscript. Nonetheless, portions of the manuscript will now need to be rewritten prior to submission in order to eliminate the overlap in comparison with earlier publications from the group.

References

- 1) AMA Manual of Style Committee. AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors (10th edition). Oxford University Press, March 2007.
<http://www.amamanualofstyle.com/view/10.1093/jama/9780195176339.001.0001/med-9780195176339-chapter-5> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 2) International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Overlapping Publications.
<http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/publishing-and-editorial-issues/overlapping-publications.html> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 3) Horrom TA. The perils of copy and paste: plagiarism in scientific publishing. J Rehabil Res Dev 2012;49(8):vii-xii.
- 4) Green L. Reviewing the scourge of self-plagiarism. M/C Journal 2005;8(5).
<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0510/07-green.php>. Accessed October 1, 2014.
- 5) Berquist TH. Self-plagiarism: another reminder to authors. AJR 2013;201:235-6.
- 6) Bakier AA, Levine D, Sheiman RG, et al. Redundant publications in radiology: shades of gray in a seemingly black-and-white issue. Radiology 2008;247:605-7.