

Troubling Duplicity

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Soc Int Urol J.2021;4(5):355–356
DOI: 10.48083/EZFK2650

The job of editor of a urologic journal is generally a good gig. The editorial team has the privilege but also the responsibility of shaping the scholarly direction of the journal, and with that to some degree, depending on the impact of the journal, the field of urology as a whole. The editors are the gatekeepers to urologic publishing, which can sometimes put the position in a negative light. The gate is closed more often than it is opened, and the editors are more often the bearers of bad rather than good news. However, other than regulating the flow of published manuscripts, the editors, together with the reviewers, are able to improve the quality of the published work compared with what is originally submitted for review. This is the most gratifying part of the job. This opportunity to engage with authors can amount to a form of mentoring. This is perhaps even more so with a journal like the SIUJ that has a truly global reach and works with many groups who are relatively inexperienced in scholarly publishing.

With all the positives, however, comes of course the occasional negative, as policing for academic misconduct is unfortunately also part of the editorial job. The process of dealing with some of these incidents is not always clear, and some consultation with publishing playbooks (eg, guidelines of the Committee on Publication Ethics [COPE]) is usually necessary.

Plagiarism is relatively straightforward to detect with online tools such as iThenticate, and generally all papers are screened soon after submission. The process for handling plagiarism is also not complicated, and it starts not with threats of punitive action but instead with a request for explanation. We have dealt with two groups of authors in the past two years who did not offer a clear explanation but simply re-submitted an updated version of the same plagiarized text with some minimal paraphrasing at the edges. This seemed to reflect an ignorance of what exactly constitutes plagiarism rather than dishonest intent. In these cases, COPE recommends that the editor informs the authors' institution of the suspected misconduct and leaves any additional action to the institution[1]. COPE clearly differentiates the responsibility of the institution for the conduct of their researchers and the responsibility of the journal for ensuring the quality of their published material. The journal does not investigate or punish. The institution is in the best position to provide the necessary education of its researchers to mitigate the risk of future plagiarism. However, it can be challenging to identify a point of contact at some institutions around the globe, and eliciting a response is even more difficult. There is also the fear that institutions may act punitively and ignore remediation. As far as we can tell, however, notifying institutions often has no repercussions for authors, other than serving as a warning of the seriousness of their misbehaviour.

A recent incident with duplicate publication proved more complicated, and also more troubling. A manuscript had undergone peer review and was being prepared with significant post-acceptance editing for online publication in the SIUJ. Fourteen days before the planned publication date, the corresponding author e-mailed a request—with no explanation—to withdraw the manuscript. We responded with a request for justification and also for approval of the request by the manuscript's co-authors. Withdrawal after acceptance of a manuscript in the absence of scientific justification represents a waste of editorial and peer-review resources[1].

The author provided no compelling explanation for his actions, but we noticed rather serendipitously just days before planned publication that the same manuscript had been published days earlier in a different journal. We were able to pull the manuscript in question out of the planned issue at the eleventh hour and prevent true duplicate publication. Interestingly, when we contacted all co-authors to explain the series of events, there was no response. We identified a contact person at the institution but without obvious contact information and were never able to obtain a response to our queries from them. The editor-in-chief of the journal in which the manuscript had been published was highly cooperative, but the editorial teams from both journals arrived at the same conclusion that, according to the COPE guidelines, there was nothing further to do other than notify the authors that the attempted duplication

had been recognized and prevented. Since there had been no duplicate publication in the end, there was no reason for retraction, and if there had been duplicate publication, usually only the secondary manuscript is retracted. Duplicate publication goes not only against ethical conduct but is also a breach in copyright law. The sole corresponding author in this case appeared to recognize his misconduct for what it was, and the co-authors remained more or less silent (one responded with dismay after a second prodding), but no further actions were taken.

Most of us likely feel that this type of misconduct in publishing should be met with harsher penalties. Importantly, COPE recommends that authors should not be blacklisted after engaging in such behaviour. Our primary responsibility as editors remains to ensure the quality of the published research. We are fortunate that the vast majority of authors have a clear understanding of the rules of scholarly publishing, and we will continue to weed out the few who do not, with the expectation that they can be educated on the same.

References

1. Committee on Publication Ethics. Publication ethics. Available at: <https://publicationethics.org/case/unethical-withdrawal-after-acceptance-maximize-impact-factor>. Accessed September 7, 2023.