Plagiarism, retraction and the future

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The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), established in 1997 by a small group of medical journal editors, is now a world-wide, multi-disciplinary group comprising more than 6000 members; Human Reproduction being one of them. As such, the journal adheres to their Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines, which amongst other things is an invaluable source of advice and guidance for those rare occasions when things go wrong (http://www.publicationethics.org/files/Code%20of%20conduct%20for%20journal%20editors_0.pdf).

In this editorial, I report the retraction of an article published by Siam, Tawfeek & Hassan (El-Minya University Hospital, El-Minya, Egypt) entitled “Sperm DNA damage due to the oxidative stress associated with varicocele” in the ‘Online first’ section of the Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics (JARG), in 2011. Its relevance to this journal is that the vast majority of the text was plagiarised from an article that appeared in Human Reproduction in 2006 (“Increased sperm DNA damage in patients with varicocele: relationship with seminal oxidative stress” 21(4):986-993).

As is so often the case in these situations, the original authors (and on this occasion, also the editor of another journal) alerted both Human Reproduction and JARG to the existence of the previously-published 2006 article. Following the recommendations laid down by COPE, the authors of the JARG article were contacted and an explanation sought. When no satisfactory explanation was forthcoming, we contacted the authors’ institution (El-Minya University Hospital) and were advised that a full and thorough investigation would be carried out. We are still awaiting the outcome of this investigation.

The retraction of an article and hence its effective (but not physical) ‘removal’ from the scientific record is thankfully an uncommon occurrence; indeed there have only been three cases in the history of this journal. Although retractions are rare, plagiarism (including not just text, but also ideas and concepts) is becoming increasingly more common with many journals uncovering instances ranging from a few sentences to almost entire manuscripts. Human Reproduction has seen an increase in this type of scientific (publication) misconduct, which until now has depended upon our eagle-eyed reviewers recognizing the recycling of their own and their colleagues’ words and phrases. However, help may be at hand and in association with our publisher Oxford University Press, we have recently been trialing the use of anti-plagiarism detection software (iThenticate). The software has been incorporated into our online manuscript submission and peer review system, enabling a very quick and thorough check to be made.

Although still in the early stages of the trial, the software has already identified a number of manuscripts that contained sufficient plagiarism to result in their rejection. Of course, software alone can not be relied upon to determine the extent and ‘seriousness’ of the plagiarism, so significant editorial input is essential to ensure that correct decisions are made. For example, is the plagiarised text the author’s own (aka self-plagiarism), is it taken from methods (if cited correctly, perhaps a lesser ‘crime’) or does it originate from the Introduction or Discussion sections?

Ultimately, we expect all submitted manuscripts to be screened using this software and we firmly believe that it will contribute (along with educating authors that a little ‘borrowing’ is not perfectly acceptable) to a better understanding of what is and more importantly, what isn’t, acceptable publication practice.

Plagiarists take heed!