Plagiarism: Avoid it like the plague

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Plagiarism (noun) /ˈpleɪdʒərɪz(ə)m/*: the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own.*[1]

When asked to write this editorial a few months ago, my first thought was to travel down memory lane and ask myself- when and where did I learn about plagiarism? I cannot recall being taught about the topic during my undergraduate days- neither as a part of the formal nor the informal curriculum. In fact, I cannot recall being taught anything about research, research ethics, medical ethics, professionalism, communication skills, or any of the soft (but essential) sciences that we now know to form the basis of good medical practice. I must however, acknowledge having been initiated into some of these areas during post-graduate studies at NIMHANS. That said, medical students were always expected to 'know' that copying (in any context) is wrong.

Plagiarism, as an aspect of academic malpractice, was made explicit during my training in the UK, where Universities had very clear guidance notes on the topic. But its seriousness and repercussions only became evident much later when, as a Training Program Director for the Northwestern Deanery, a number of instances of plagiarism were brought to my attention. Unfortunately, a number of these involved overseas graduates and at least one of these had to be escalated to be investigated both- under the MHPS (Maintaining High Professional Standards) policy of the NHS (National Health Service), UK, and by the Professional Standards Committee of the University.

In my experience, only a minority of students/ authors plagiarize intentionally. Many more plagiarize due to a poor understanding of referencing norms, citing conventions and what is considered as 'common knowledge'. To an extent, the pressure to 'publish or perish' may also be a contributing factor, especially in situations where a doctor's academic progression hinges upon their research publications.

The prevalent view of plagiarism is that of intellectual theft and academic dishonesty. But some researchers (mostly linguists and educationists) have conceptualised plagiarism differently.[2] Matalene (1985) for example, talks about how the Western concept of 'self-expression' as one's own intellectual property is not necessarily universal in its remit. In fact, 'imitation' and 'rote learning' as an aspect of inter-textual practice, may actually represent an intermediate stage of

academic development- especially in second language writing.[3-5]

That said, whichever it is conceptualised, Universities and Journals still consider plagiarism to be a form of academic malpractice and it can have important adverse consequences when detected.

So what constitutes plagiarism?

The term plagiarism encompasses a wide range of copying and non-citing behaviours. Some authors copy-paste plagiarized material (sentences, paragraphs, images, tables, data or even entire articles) from another source word-for-word into their own work without citing the relevant reference and/ or using quotation marks. Some authors attempt to disguise it by copying material from more than one source and stringing it together. Others attempt to alter the copied content by tweaking specific words, phrases or even paraphrasing entire paragraphs while retaining the original author's ideas. Some do not adequately cite the original source(s) for the content they have borrowed. Still others use their own previous papers to plagiarise from (self-plagiarism). What is important to note here is that not all borrowed statements or material needs to be referenced. Information that is considered as 'common knowledge' does not need to be cited. For example, (as my own teacher Prof. N. Janakiramaiah once said to us,) the statement 'the Sun rises in the East' does not need to be referenced- it is common knowledge! Similarly, the use of material that exists in the public domain is not considered a copyright infringement (though it still needs to be cited appropriately).

Essentially, the crux of the issue is that the plagiarizer stands to gain unearned and undeserved credit for someone else's intellectual property- irrespective of whether it was intended or not. Together with other academic (mal)practices like collusion, fabrication, falsification and guest authorship, plagiarism undermines academic integrity and may also violate statutory copyright laws.

How prevalent is Plagiarism in India?

A PubMed search returned very few relevant articles. Amongst these, I found a recent paper in the Journal of Korean Medical Science which looked at the retraction rate of articles in Indian medical literature.[6] Retraction of articles (post-publication) might indicate possible plagiarism or other forms of academic malpractice. The authors found that 46 articles had been

retracted from Medline database since 2010- mostly for plagiarism (duplication of text, figures or tables, without appropriate referencing), duplicate publications and allegations of data manipulation. Further, 6 out of 67 original articles submitted to a leading Indian Rheumatology journal during 2016-17 had been rejected due to plagiarism. In another article that explored differences in plagiarism across nations, Amos (2014) reported that 49 papers from India had been retracted (from PubMed) during the period 2008-2012. Of these 18 were retracted due to plagiarism- a dubious distinction of being second only to China.[7] What is more concerning are reports that academic dishonesty (including plagiarism) is widely prevalent in Indian Medical schools too, with some suggestion that these begin during school years itself.[8]

In my opinion, these reported rates of plagiarism in India are only the tip of the iceberg. If all aspects of academic practice are accounted for (for example MD, DNB & PhD theses, research articles, research project proposals, academic assignments, and even clinical reports), I suspect we will find plagiarism to be much more widespread. Moreover current research has only focused upon the theft of words (or strings thereof). If the theft of 'ideas' were also to be looked at, the prevalence would be substantially higher.

Detecting Plagiarism

Most reputable academic journals and Universities use software programs to screen submissions for plagiarism. Some of these programs need to be subscribed to, while others are available free of cost online (albeit with some restrictions). Essentially, these programs search for similarities between the submitted material and a large number of online databases- which include research papers, dissertations and theses, textbooks, monographs, internet website content, and so on. Universities and journals can set their own thresholds for detection of 'word-to-word' plagiarism, but by and large, the 'seven-words-in-a-row' criterion is widely adopted. When a plagiarism instance is suspected in the manuscript, it is usually reviewed manually by the Editor or a University academic, who uses his/her judgment (and often times takes a second opinion too) as to whether it constitutes an act of plagiarism.

Once identified, organisations have a range of sanctions available to impose upon the erring author. University sanctions can range from a written warning to a loss of academic credit hours and debarment from future courses at the University. A referral to the regulating body's professional standards committee is also a possibility. In addition to rejecting the paper outright (or retracting the same), Journal Editors may bar the authors from any further publications in the journal, and may even opt to inform other Journal editors as well of the transgression. Finally,

infringement of copyright laws can also have legal repercussions.

Plagiarism, once identified, can therefore have serious repercussions, but the consequence often depends upon the extent, intent and seriousness of the transgression, as well as upon whether this was a first or repeat instance. In countries where medical practice is rigorously regulated (like the UK), all such incidents are expected to be included in the doctor's annual appraisal portfolio, and acted and reflected upon, thus feeding into the doctor's revalidation process too.

The situation in India has only begun to change in the recent past. It was recently reported that the University Grants Commission (UGC) has adopted a new policy to deal with academic plagiarism. The new rules state that 'similarities up to 10%' in an academic work is acceptable, but more extensive copying will attract penalties.[9]

So how can plagiarism be avoided?

Most Universities abroad have a compulsory teaching module on academic malpractice at the beginning of all courses. Students are encouraged to screen their own submissions (assignments, theses, etc.) using a plagiarism software before submitting their work for assessment. Adoption of a similar approach by Indian Universities and Journals will be a step forward in containing plagiarism.

At an individual level, the following simple steps may help.
1. Read extensively about the topic at hand.
2. Make notes on your understanding of the topic from different sources you have researched (along with the citations).
3. Form your own ideas about what you intend to convey and jot these down.
4. Do not copy and paste from other sources (including and especially from the Internet).
5. If you do need to quote directly from another source, use quotation marks and cite the original source correctly.
6. Read and understand the prescribed referencing norms and citation conventions for the work you wish to submit.
7. If quoting directly from a source, try and keep the quoted material as brief and relevant as possible.
8. If you wish to convey what someone else has already conveyed, do it in your own words, or at least paraphrase the material, with an appropriate reference to the source.
9. Take the necessary permissions if you wish to reproduce figures or tables from another source.
10. Do not pass off another author's ideas or hypotheses or explanations as your own- always attribute to them appropriately.

Finally, always remember: Plagiarism hurts- Avoid it like the plague.

Conflicts of Interest

Firstly, I am a member of the advisory/ editorial boards of the Telangana Journal of Psychiatry and Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine.

Secondly, I am the Convenor of the Ethics sub-committee of the Indian Psychiatric Society. As such I have a related interest in raising awareness of ethical issues in academic practice (amongst other responsibilities). Hopefully, this editorial is one small step in that direction.

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