Why Should the *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* Apologize for Publishing a Paper Plagiarized from Its Archives?

In the March 2011 issue of the *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* (*Journal*), a retraction was published in which the authors stated the following: “we realized after our article had been published that major parts of the text had been plagiarized almost verbatim from Colombo et al.” (3). The plagiarists apologized “to Prof. Colombo . . . and to *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* readers” (3). However, no explicit word of apology came from the *Journal* itself. There are at least two reasons for which we believe the *Journal* should also have apologized to its contributors and readers.

First, the article by Colombo et al. (4) was published in the *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* in 2006. Yet, in 2010, plagiarists were able to copy not just parts but the entire article and have their plagiarism published in the same *Journal* without notice. Clearly, the review process in 2010 completely failed the layers of editors, editorial board members, and *ad hoc* reviewers (1) who evaluated the Colombo et al. paper just 4 years earlier.

Second, the plagiarism (2) underwent a peer review that was at best complaisant and not reflecting the reputation of the *Journal* (<http://jcm.asm.org/>) and at worst an exercise that amounted to no review. In reading the plagiarism to see if anything should have been revised, even though plagiarism would have remained undetected, we found at least the following six internal inconsistencies:

- The incidence rates were expressed only per 1,000 admissions but not per patient days, as indicated in “Statistical analysis.”
- Males comprised 58.64% of cases (as stated in Table 1 of the article) and not 64.02%, as stated in the text.
- Cancer was documented for 311 cases (31.61%), and 20 of these cancers (2.03%) were hematologic malignancies (Table 1), as opposed to 195 (19.84%) and 35 (17.94%), respectively, as stated in the text.
- At the time of candidemia, 120 patients were receiving a systemic antifungal agent (fluconazole, 78; amphotericin B, 31; itraconazole, 3; voriconazole, 3; echinocandins, 5) and not 122 patients, as they stated.
- *Candida krusei* comprised 2.13% (Table 2) and not 5% of cases, as stated in the text.
- Table 2 is titled “Species distribution and incidence . . .,” with no incidence data in the table.

More comments could be made, such as regarding the discussion of data from Italy using a citation from Chile (page 4203, reference 40) (2). But, while we recognize that reviewers did not have the benefit of hindsight we now have, the above inconsistencies were so obvious that the submitters should have been queried about and/or asked to reconcile their inconsistencies, whether their submission was a plagiarist or not.

If the *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* can gladly accept apologies from others who plagiarized an article initially published elsewhere (5), then the *Journal* certainly can extend its own apologies to its contributors and readers for publishing a poorly reviewed plagiarist of its own archived article.

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Editor in Chief's Reply

In the foregoing comment letter, Nsuami et al. draw attention to a 2010 publication in the *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* (JCM) in which Cisterna et al. (1) were found to have plagiarized large segments of text from a paper that had been published by Colombo and colleagues 4 years earlier (3).

Regarding this matter, a concern for plagiarism by Cisterna et al. had been brought to our attention by a reader of the Cisterna et al. paper shortly after it had been published. A thorough examination of the Cisterna et al. publication was immediately undertaken using the CrossCheck electronic plagiarism screening system. CrossCheck was developed by CrossRef (<http://www.crossref.org/>) in collaboration with iThenticate (<http://www.crossref.org/crosscheck/index.html>). The system provides a report that compares the text in question to text in a continuously updated database of published articles. The CrossCheck report was analyzed by an ethics panel of the American Society for Microbiology (ASM) Publications Board, and a determination was made that Cisterna et al. had indeed extensively plagiarized the Colombo et al. paper.

On this basis, Cisterna et al. were instructed to draft a retraction of their paper. Their retraction was subsequently published in JCM (2). In addition, Cisterna was informed that he would be banned from publishing any material in any ASM journal for 2 years. This sanction was not imposed on the coauthors of the Cisterna et al. paper, as they provided evi-

dence that they had not participated in the study or had any involvement in developing the manuscript that was published. The coauthors claimed to have learned of the paper only after it had been submitted for publication. And lastly, a correspondence was sent to Colombo et al. in which I expressed our regret that this unfortunate incident had occurred.

In the foregoing comment letter, Nsuami et al. contend that JCM should apologize to its readers for not having recognized the plagiarism of Cisterna et al. prior to publication of their paper and, further, that the peer review process that had been applied to the Cisterna et al. paper had been flawed and inadequate. As Editor in Chief of JCM, I enthusiastically reject both of these assertions.

Approximately 2,500 manuscripts are considered annually for publication by JCM. There simply does not currently exist a cost-effective plagiarism screening process that could be applied proactively to this number of manuscripts that would yield reliable information in a timely manner. For this reason, the ASM and JCM apply the CrossCheck plagiarism screen selectively whenever concerns for plagiarism arise.

The position of the ASM and JCM regarding matters of plagiarism is explicitly articulated in the JCM author instructions (http://jcm.asm.org/misc/journal-ita_edl.dtl#02). Therein, we state clearly and emphatically that plagiarism will not be tolerated and, further, that by virtue of their participation as authors, authors of submitted papers understand and accept this dictate. We believe that this position is consistent with the ethical precepts of current publication practices in the peer-reviewed medical scientific literature.

I find the second assertion of Nsuami et al., namely, that peer review of the Cisterna et al. paper was inadequate, at best curious; uniformed and lacking in common sense might be better terms. The Cisterna et al. paper was carefully and thoroughly reviewed by two individuals with primary expertise in the field of the epidemiology of antifungal resistance, the focus

of the Cisterna et al. paper. While it is true that this review process failed to identify certain data presentation inconsistencies by Cisterna et al., a fact that we very much regret, overall the reviews were comprehensive and instructive. That the review process did not recognize the plagiarism of Cisterna et al., something we also regret, is perhaps understandable insofar as the paper that was plagiarized had been published 4 years previously and none of the reviewers had participated in that investigation. As with most things, the peer review process is simply not perfect, nor will it ever be.

In summary, as is true of all journals published by the ASM, JCM takes the matter of plagiarism very seriously. Further, we strongly believe that the process we have in place for assessing publications for plagiarism, while not infallible, is rigorous, practical, and nearly always works.

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