To the Editors' and Authors'

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Received: 26 February 2011 / Accepted: 2 March 2011 / Published online: 18 March 2011
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As a freelance reviewer for few journals based in India, I am often engrossed with the review of manuscripts being sent to me, especially, in the recent past. Understandably, the culture of increased manuscript submission was the consequence of governing body regulations in India, which had suddenly awakened to instill a sense of continuing education in the minds of the teaching faculty.

As most were trained as good practitioners' than reasonable science writers, it is not unusual for prospective authors' to rely on previously published materials to gain an overview before they start to write. And inevitably, they may also subconsciously reproduce few exact sentences from other print materials amounting to plagiarism. But what actually constitutes text plagiarism? According to Pecorari [1], copying word for word from source text rather than spontaneous composition is considered text plagiarism. He also believes that in-text citation of the sourced material is more important than "simply listing a work in the reference list" [1]. The quoted phrase is repeated from the cited authors' own words, which does not constitute plagiarism, but a whole article cannot be legitimately written with just quotation marks.

The perception of text plagiarism might vary among authors and academic experts in India. What with authors (when confronted) claiming as coincidental or believe on the lines that "borrowing sentences in the part of a paper does not amount to plagiarism, especially, when the results are original" [2].

Although, it is widely believed that editors are indifferent towards charges of plagiarism [3], I present few instances of suspected plagiarism and the response of the concerned journal editors in India. In case one, the reader found that there was substantial textual copying (with or without attribution) in an article published in a journal, and in case two and three, textual copying was detected at the stage of peer review. In the latter instance, on appraisal, the editors of the concerned journals promptly rejected the manuscripts. On the other hand, in case one, there was denial of textual plagiarism by one of the experts while the other deemed it as 'unintentional'. A similar allegation with an international journal, which after expert evaluation, swiftly acted on the charge of plagiarism. Incidentally, the author was also the journal editor where there was denial of outright plagiarism by one of the reviewers. Arguably, the reviewer is likely to be correct in his view as his opinion might have been based on the assumption that "today's patch-writer is tomorrow's competent academic writer, given the necessary support to develop" [1].

The US office for research integrity (see <http://ori.dhhs.gov/policies/plagiarism.shtml>) defines text plagiarism as substantial unattributed textual copying of others. However, it excludes limited usage of pertinent sentences. But this should not be construed to mean that limited copy-typed texts from wider sources not amount to plagiarism.

The electronic resource made it possible both in terms of copying and detection of such tactics [4]. This is evident from the reasons assigned for retracted papers (see <http://blogs.wiley.com/publishingnews/2010/06/30/retractions-in-wiley-blackwell-journals/>). In just 7 months (September 2009 to March 2010) 17 cases were retracted for text duplication (29%) and serious error plus text duplication in another 6% of retractions. A search (Pubmed) with keywords like "retraction and India" would show that 63% of

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retractions involved a particular authors'. This indicates that plagiarism or academic fraud is committed more often by repeat offenders.

A number of journal editor's uses software (see <http://www.nature.com/news/2010/100705/full/466167a.html>) to screen manuscripts for the degree of text similarity at the time of submission. This would definitely save time and energy not only for the journals, but also for the reviewers. The move by a medical university, in India, to check plagiarism in the submitted dissertation or PhD thesis is a step in the right direction to discourage textual plagiarism (<http://www.tnmmu.ac.in/plagiarism.htm>). But, however, screening with software may also produce too many results for a document when there is slight overlap with other sources (see <http://arxiv.org/abs/cs/0702012>). For example, copy the first paragraph above and paste in the "input your text" column in eTBLAST (see <http://etest.vbi.vt.edu/etblast3/>) for similarity based text-matching to find the number of matching results which would take considerable time by manual checks to establish whether plagiarism or not [5].

Although, a number of software is in use and increasingly, journals have become alert to detect plagiarism, it is in the hands of science writers and researchers to attenuate plagiarism (in any form) before readers stop trusting scientific messages.

Conflict of interest The author declares no conflict of interest.

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