Self-Plagiarism

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In this issue of *The Oncologist*, we publish a retraction by Brian Rini, M.D., of the Cleveland Clinic regarding his article published in *The Oncologist* in March 2005, entitled “VEGF-Targeted Therapy in Metastatic Renal Cell Carcinoma” [1]. We believe the readers deserve an explanation for this action.

The circumstances leading to this retraction are as follows. On August 4, 2011, a reader called to our attention the very close similarity of the article in question to an earlier publication by Rini and Eric Small, his mentor at the University of California, San Francisco, published in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* (JCO) in February 2005 [2]. A careful reading of the two papers revealed that at least 75% of the content of *The Oncologist* paper was taken, verbatim, from the JCO publication, without reference or attestation. A search of other publications at that time revealed other reviews by Dr. Rini and colleagues on the same general subject of anti-angiogenesis drugs in renal cancer [3–5]. One of these papers, in the *British Journal of Urology International* (BJU) [3], contained numerous verbatim passages from *The Oncologist* paper. One other publication, in *Expert Review of Anticancer Therapy* [4], reproduced several verbatim sentences and a paragraph from *The Oncologist* article. The co-authors and editors of the BJU and JCO papers have been notified of our findings, as have institutional officials at the Cleveland Clinic.

Our journal and all other peer-reviewed medical publications expressly prohibit submission of material that has been submitted to or published by another journal. There are both ethical and legal reasons for this prohibition. It is clearly unethical to misrepresent a manuscript as original work when it is being published, or has been published, elsewhere, even if that work is one's own or from a book one has edited. One of the most public cases of plagiarism,

involving Kenneth Melmon, a Professor at Stanford University School of Medicine, made headlines thirty years ago. Melmon, under intense pressure to complete his own chapter in another textbook, lifted extensive material, verbatim, from the textbook, Goodman and Gilman [6], that he was editing, and did so without attribution to the source or authors. The Melmon episode crystallized academic thinking about the subject of plagiarism, and led to his resignation as Chair of Stanford's Department of Medicine [7–9].

It requires effort and thought to write about the same subject in an original way in multiple publications. It is much easier to simply cut and paste from an earlier work. While most authors are well aware of the proscriptions against use of material published by others, it may be less obvious that self-plagiarism is an equally serious transgression, with consequences for the responsible author's career and academic standing. There are legal reasons as well for prohibiting plagiarism of material written either by others or by oneself. In allowing publication of a manuscript, the author must assign copyright to the journal's publisher, and obviously it is illegal to assign copyright of the same material to multiple journals and publishers. While the immediate reaction to self-plagiarism might be less punitive (one is after all stealing from one's own work), the copyright issue is still a serious legal problem. Second, it is unethical to represent the work as original in a second publication, and from an academic standpoint, to expand one's bibliography with multiple versions of the same material. The proliferation of journals that publish reviews, often ghostwritten, without peer review, and often under sponsorship by commercial interests, has markedly increased the potential for self-plagiarism, and as this incident illustrates, abuses are likely widespread.

Computer programs are used in detecting homology be-

tween published articles, and the potential for detecting plagiarized material is rapidly expanding. The incident described above is regrettable for all parties concerned (author, co-authors, journals, and readers), and stands as a reminder of the need to respect the sanctity of publication guidelines, and to use the privilege of authorship and co-authorship with prudence and respect.

Our Senior Editors have reviewed the circumstances surrounding the author's retraction and support our decision to publish this notice. As always, we welcome your

thoughts and we also acknowledge with gratitude the reader who brought this serious incident to our attention.

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