Duplicate Publications : A Wake Up Call

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Most biomedical journals follow the guidelines laid down by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors that are published as “Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals” [1]. All authors are to make a full statement about all submissions and previous reports that might be regarded as duplicate publication of the same or similar work. Despite this, various forms of duplicate publications are reported in medical literature. In the most recent incident, a case of duplicate publication involving this journal and the Indian Journal of Surgery came to our attention. The article “A Case of Nosocomial Atypical Mycobacterial Infection”, MJAFI 2007;63: 201-2, also appeared as “An Unusual Post Operative Wound Infection” in Indian Journal of Surgery 2007;69:71-3. We do not know if this duplication happened accidentally, deliberately or in ignorance. Based on this episode we wish to make our readers aware of what constitutes duplicate publication and breach of publishing ethics.

Duplicate publication has been defined as publication of a scientific paper, which substantially overlaps with one that is already published [2]. What is substantial however remains contentious and different patterns of duplication have been reported. The articles, which are just a copy such as the one in question, are most easily recognized. Researchers who have received grants for their work and are under pressure to show a number of publications may resort to splitting of data from one large study and publishing each piece as individual manuscripts in different or even the same journal. This form of duplication has been coined as “Salami Publications” [3]. Some articles are expanded by addition of supplementary data to form a definitive article and are an extension of a preliminary study published earlier. This is referred to as “Meat Extender” [4]. There is yet another form of duplication, which is most difficult to recognize, in which both articles originate from the same

study but the sample and outcomes are different.

Some point out that the journals may have different readership and repetitions may only reinforce an important point. Then why is duplicate publication frowned upon? Repetitions take up valuable space in the journal that may have to reject another deserving article, it wastes time of the editors, and as the observations are reported repeatedly it misleads the reader to its occurrence. An earlier electronic dissemination of an oral presentation [5] or the translation of an article to another language may be accepted. But even here the authors must show a cross reference of the duplicate article with the original [2]. This brings us to the vexing question of why authors duplicate? It is apparent that many of the authors feel compelled for career reasons to publish more papers or even justify their grants. Therefore is it time for us in Armed Forces Medical Services to judge authors by the quality of their articles, rather than by numbers alone?

To avoid the pitfalls of duplication all authors should be aware of the issues of duplication and openly declare the original. They should not hesitate to cite the other publication. If the material is as yet unpublished but under consideration by another journal, they should supply the unpublished material to the journal and perhaps the editors would be able to guide the authors [6].

What can journals do about duplicate publication? On finding a duplicate publication the journals can publish notices in their issues and retract the article. More aggressive editors have informed the head of the institution from where the article was published and issued a ban on further publications by the authors in their journals. In extreme cases authors can face civil suits for infringement of copywrite laws [3]. This places a greater responsibility even on the editors to be on guard for possible duplicate publications. We hope that this editorial will serve as a timely reminder to all of us to uphold ethical standards of biomedical publications.

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