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## Journals need to provide better guidance for victims of plagiarism

Academics and researchers are ill prepared for what to do when they're victims of publication misconduct, as **Andrew Colman and colleagues** found out when their article was plagiarised

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Plagiarism in published research articles is a threat to the integrity of the scientific record, and it seems to be on the increase—boosted by the growing industry of predatory publishing.<sup>1</sup> Open access journals of dubious quality exploit researchers by charging publication fees for rapid publication without rigorous scrutiny. Demand for easy and rapid publication of articles, in turn, arises from the increasingly competitive market in academic jobs and the demand this creates for researchers to publish journal articles. Plagiarism in predatory journals threatens to erode the integrity of higher degrees and CVs, and hence potentially the expertise of doctors, scientists, and other professionals, and of the academics who train them.<sup>2,3</sup>

We discovered in March 2022 that an article we'd published<sup>4</sup> had been plagiarised in an obscure journal.<sup>5</sup> We might never have known of the plagiarism had we not been alerted to it by a student who spotted the duplication. The plagiarising article was an almost word-for-word copy of our original, apart from the title and byline, and we were shocked to see it published. We felt violated by the theft of our work and annoyed that someone else was claiming credit for all the effort we'd put into our published article.

We complained to the editor of the journal that had published the plagiarising article and to the author's university but received no reply. We then alerted Retraction Watch, an online service that campaigns against scientific fraud and reports retractions. When Retraction Watch contacted the journal, the journal quickly removed the plagiarising article,<sup>6</sup> although without publication of an appropriate retraction notice, and it can still be found through an online search. Meanwhile, the eagle eyed student found another article<sup>7</sup> that also plagiarised our original, but with most of our sentences paraphrased. After an intervention from Retraction Watch, it too was eventually taken down, albeit again without any retraction notice.<sup>8</sup>

When we were first confronted with the plagiarism of our work, we had no idea how best to handle it. We considered approaching the plagiarising author in the first instance, but colleagues advised us against doing so. We reviewed online information about policies for dealing with scientific misconduct, provided by the journal in which our original article was published. These policies included advice about detecting and reporting suspected scientific misconduct in their journal, but no advice or obvious routes for alerting the journal about plagiarism elsewhere. We were made aware of the journal's research integrity team, members of which can assist

in such cases, only after Retraction Watch got involved.

### Failures in the wider system

Academics and scientific researchers receive training on almost every aspect of the processes of research and publication, apart from what to do if they're plagiarised. It would have been helpful if we had known from the start about the role of publishers in pursuing cases of plagiarism of material they've published. We would also have benefited from greater awareness of Retraction Watch and their best practice advice to avoid any early communication with a putative plagiarist but to complain instead to the plagiarising journal in the first instance, and then to Retraction Watch if the journal fails to promise a swift retraction of the offending article.

Above all, we suggest that scientific journals publish guidelines on what authors should do when plagiarised and provide prominent information about who to contact if scientific misconduct is suspected. As one anonymous victim of plagiarism noted in 2017, few if any journals offer practical help, and there isn't much guidance available more widely.<sup>9</sup> An umbrella organisation such as the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) or the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) could also coordinate with the major commercial publishers to produce a joint guidance protocol for authors on how to respond if plagiarised. COPE already provides explicit guidance for journal editors on when and how to retract articles,<sup>10</sup> but the predatory journals that are largely responsible for publishing plagiarised articles have little incentive to retract them.

Fraudulent articles need to be located and retracted to preserve the integrity and veracity of the scientific record. Good journals already use internet based plagiarism checkers on manuscripts submitted for publication, but perhaps they should also periodically check their archive of published articles. This process could be automated and should be virtually cost-free. If any plagiarised article was highly likely to be swiftly detected and exposed as fraudulent, then potential plagiarists would surely be deterred—at least to some extent. These tools tend to detect only the most blatant word-for-word plagiarism, however, and not necessarily text that has been paraphrased.<sup>11</sup>

Broader questions about research integrity in academic publishing are likely to arise in the future as artificial intelligence (AI) platforms such as ChatGPT develop and improve their capacity to produce academic papers.<sup>12</sup> Yet perhaps AI could also provide the solution. AI tools that aid in the detection of AI generated text are starting to become

available, but perhaps in the future these could be refined to detect plagiarism and other forms of scientific misconduct.

Ultimately, academic institutions have a responsibility to establish and reinforce policies around publication ethics, to check for poor publication ethics in their recruitment processes, and to provide effective education on plagiarism to their students and staff.<sup>3 13</sup> This will help to prevent scientific misconduct going forward. For now, though, publishers could be doing more to support authors whose work has been plagiarised.

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