

Editorial

Unintentional Plagiarism

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I admired the depth and the authenticity of the two editorials about plagiarism written by Dr. Mohammed A Al-Muharraqi and Dr Zbys Fedorowicz. The editorials covered many aspects of plagiarism, but an important facet has not been tackled that is “unintentional plagiarism”, which is plaguing this region and many others because English is a second language^{1,2}.

Before we continue, we must first define plagiarism. What is considered plagiarism and what is not?

“Plagiarism is copying a whole paragraph without paraphrasing with or without a reference, paraphrasing a paragraph in the article without a reference. Copying verbatim a sentence or paragraph and pasting it without quotation and references.”

There are several problems facing authors whose native language is not English. The most important is the language usage, next is plagiarism. Most authors from the Arab countries use Arabic as their first language and they are proud of their language heritage. Their pride is not matched by any other race, probably they are the proudest race on earth; their language was established thousands of years in verse, logic and science; at one time that language dominated more than half of the globe. In a poem over 1500 years old, the poet recites “*when our child reaches the stage of weaning from breast feeding, all dictators and powerful men pray for him.*”

In the old days, Arabic language was the medium for scientific communication, but now it has been replaced by English language. Some Arabs would not acknowledge this fact, they want to revive their language to its previous glory, rightly so, but they do not have the means of removing the rust which has accumulated for over 600 years of neglect of science and scientists. Unfortunately, the neglect is continuing; the best example is Bahrain Medical Bulletin, which recently has been deprived from the grants given by the Ministry of Information and BDF hospital. The journal is doomed to disappear after 30 years in existence and for being the podium for publication from the academics in this country and the region.

As an editor, for many years, I found that most of the plagiarism in articles submitted to Bahrain Medical Bulletin is unintentional.

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When I discover plagiarism, I meet the author and explain to her/him; most of them are surprised and have never heard of plagiarism. Many authors from the Middle East and non-English speaking regions think that copying the knowledge is the way to be perfect in their second language and are more accurate in transmitting the information, as well as being fair to the original author because their understanding of their second language is far from being perfect. In their effort to be perfect and avoid grammatical errors they copy others' authors ideas, information, words, expression and methods. Although, many of them studied medicine in English, but their command of that language is poorly developed, even after their graduation, their reading pattern is erratic.

Many of the Doctors think that knowledge on the internet or in books and journals are free to copy from; very few understand the copyright law and many of them have never heard about that law. Once I explain to them that there is a copyright law which protects ideas and theories and any formal writing, even some communications are protected by that law, they are surprised.

Unfortunately, there is no emphasis on teaching research methods in most of the Middle East Medical Colleges; therefore, there is no stress on plagiarism. In some medical schools in the Middle East, the medical staff, professors and assistant professors, are allowed to copy from other text books and publish the book locally in their names; even some would go further by selling what they put together as photocopy, no mention of a printing house, a publisher or ISSN number. Furthermore, no one would object to such a practice from the university or the community.

In some countries of the Middle East, copyright has not been introduced except in the last 30 years; even in those countries where it was introduced before, the law was not emphasized by the media, Universities and Colleges and not enforced by law. Therefore, most of the plagiarism that we see as editors is unintentional.

I found all the authors, we deal with, are more than willing to change once you explain to them paraphrasing and quotation for verbatim. Therefore, we should not judge our authors harshly; most of the time, they are not aware that they are practicing plagiarism.

In the research writing and editing workshop, which Dr Hilli and I conduct, we advise the candidates to make a card for each reference they consult. On that card, they should write the ideas or information they intend to copy or paraphrase from that reference. Their own ideas and summaries should be documented in another card labeled "self". Whatever something copied verbatim, it should be in quotation with a reference number and those paraphrased is with a reference number. Their source should be documented clearly with the text they are going to use. A researcher needs to do this to avoid being confused as to what belongs to him and what belongs to others, especially if he is using copy and paste from the internet or any electronic document.

If they do not document these sources at the time of reading, eventually, they would forget the source and they will not know whether that paragraph or sentence is theirs or somebody else's. They have to remember that when they are reading fast several

documents and collecting data for their research, most of what they read goes into their short-term memory (also termed recent or working memory, commonly accepted capacity is 7+2), which will hold the information in an active, readily available state for a short period of time. These informations will not go into their long-term memory except after repetition and deep thought. Finally, our advice to authors is to consult the editor on what is considered plagiarism and what is not.

Often plagiarism in medical student writing is unintentional. Many medical students copy topics on their assigned reports and in their elementary research. Most of the time they are not reprimanded for doing so by their professors or their instructors, some of their professors never heard of the copyright law. Therefore, they do not realize the mistake and it becomes some kind of a habit in their future behaviors. Such a “research method” should never be encouraged among medical students. Many students were not taught critical writing and critical reading. The best example is the journal clubs held weekly in many departments; usually the junior doctor presents the subject. During the presentation, she/he recites names and words without knowing their meanings – typical of people who have been taught to learn by heart and never heard of “problem solving”. In the journal club, juniors should have been told that medical knowledge is available in books, journals and internet; the objective of journal club should be to teach the junior staff to practice their critical skills and their faculty of dissecting an article and envision the level of scientific evidence it provides to body of medical knowledge. In our editing and research workshop, we teach candidates to read critically any book or journal even if it is written by their masters. We always remind them of what Bertrand Russell said, “Many people would sooner die than think; In fact, they do so.”

My advise to authors is to report to the editor of the journal of what he copied word for word ‘Verbatim’ and the editor will be sympathetic and helpful; that is better than being labeled as plagiarist and live with that shame all his life. In some countries, plagiarist will be punished by being stricken off the medical register or forced to resign his position in the hierarchy of the medical field.

In the past, some plagiarist did human civilization a favor. Let us remember that much of human heritage would have been lost; it is only the plagiarists who saved the day. Over half a million documents from Assyria, Greece, Roman, Persia, Egypt, India and many other nations which were kept in the library of Alexandria were destroyed save few copies which escaped burning by Christian fanatics who destroyed the library of Alexandria; it is similar to the destruction of Buddha temple by Taliban in Afghanistan. The difference is tremendous because the library contained the heritage of human being during several centuries. The library was an institute of research. More than a hundred researchers used to work in the library. The library is directed by a philosopher, the last one was Hypatia who was killed during the destruction of the library by Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria from 385 to 412 AD. A Christian Church was built in the place of the library (probably around 391 AD)^{3,4}.

Why do I mention the story of Alexandria library? The answer is simple: the few copies that escaped the destruction and were acquired by the Arab or call it the Islamic civilization were passed to the Arab philosophers, physicians and scientists; they translated, copied the remaining copies and added to them their thoughts and their inventions. Therefore, they could be considered by our recent definition as plagiarists but these people saved the loss of the remaining human heritage from being forgotten. Actually, they did the human civilization a favor because many of the original copies were lost forever. All the books in Baghdad library and medical school were lost forever after the Moguls attacked Baghdad and burned the city and the library; no one was able to copy any. The same thing happened to the books in Granada and Cordoba when they were thrown in the river after the Moslem defeat. Therefore, let us admit that these historical plagiarists did a favor to the human heritage. “Dante’s inferno” would not have been without the Arab poet “Abu Alaa Al Maari.” “Arabian Nights”, “Tales of Kalila and Dimna” and many others were the product of translators and plagiarists.

Not very far in the distant history, even great scientist such as Isaac Newton was labeled as plagiarist according to *Steven Hawking in his book “A Brief History of Time.” Steven Hawking followed Isaac Newton, after many years, for the chair of professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University. Even though, Isaac Newton has been discovered to have some plagiarized manuscript, it did not belittle his great achievements in physics and maths⁵. Therefore sometimes, some great scientists, philosophers and thinkers make unacceptable errors, but that does not wipe away their great achievements and their contribution to the knowledge of the human kind. Not to forget Bill Gates when he said (1970), “No one needs more than 65 KB for a PC.”*

Finally, give due to those who have contributed before you to the enrichment of the scientific literature and consult your editors to avoid being labeled as plagiarist.

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