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PLAGIARISM PENALTIES

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Research in all areas of sciences and humanities has led to the creation of a highly competitive environment which necessitates reporting of ideas, and discoveries at rapid pace. The emergence of new technologies of communication has significantly enhanced the capabilities of individuals to record and transcribe data at high speed. Even though, one can accumulate information in a fraction of time, but quite often the creative skills and ability to write one's own original thoughts do not match the required level of output. Writing ideas in one's own words is not always easy and at times it becomes quite challenging particularly for those with limited command over the language. These situations often tempt a writer to look around easily available resources.

What is Plagiarism?

Using the text written by someone else without paraphrasing and then presenting it as his/her own is plagiarism. It is interesting to note that quite often plagiarism is reported to be the most common form of misconduct in the USA⁽¹⁾. Irrespective of position and ranks, this situation is in existence at all levels of education and research. In the current situation of knowledge explosion, we are also witnessing an increasing trend in the duplication, falsification and unverifiable data presentation in student reports, theses and even journal articles written by researchers⁽²⁾.

Significance of Plagiarism

The menace of plagiarism has afflicted the literature so widely that it hasn't spared any discipline and speciality. This has become a big issue for the guardians of publications and evaluators of academic literature to discriminate between the original and the fraudulent material. Identifying and recognizing such acts of misconduct have not been easy, particularly where the original source is not available in electronic format or available from an easily accessible library collection. However, the improvement in technology has also made it possible to identify these violations of integrity, particularly plagiarism in articles by using electronic tools and other sources available on the internet that can identify similarity index.⁽³⁾ In biomedical sciences the practice of writing systematic reviews often helps in catching plagiarism as the authors of these reviews conduct extensive literature search and have often reported duplication and detected close similarities in published material⁽⁴⁾. Despite the availability of numerous tools for the detection of plagiarism on the electronic format, one

must take into consideration that these tools only determine the extent of similarity (similarity index) between an article submitted against those in the repository of the reference database. It is therefore important to move cautiously before making a final judgement whether an article contents are plagiarized to a significant extent.⁽⁵⁾ In fact assessing the degree of plagiarism at time becomes complex as there are several factors including, cultural, discipline, awareness and command over language may influence the indulgence into this act of misconduct.⁽⁶⁾

Why it is a Punishable Crime?

Academic institutions, publishers and regulatory bodies all around the world have a consensus that plagiarism is a punishable offence. Such bodies are now exercising vigilance to ensure that false data and duplicated writings do not appear in reports and articles submitted for publications. For this purpose various measures and detection tools are used.⁽⁷⁾ While among the individuals originating from non-native English speaking countries, inadequate vocabulary and language barriers are often attributed as reasons for indulging into paraphrasing plagiarism and copying. In addition to this the availability to the enormous source of material through the internet seemingly tempts students and researchers to indulge in a copy paste approach.⁽⁸⁾

A general perception, attributes plagiarism to lack of adequate writing skills. But this doesn't seem to be the only reason as studies from non-native English speaking countries involving medical students portray variety of reasons for students' indulgence into plagiarism. These include; lack of awareness of plagiarism as an offense⁽⁹⁾ and in cases where students were made aware of

plagiarism prior to given written assignments, it was considered less riskier to plagiarise and not get caught then getting failed in an assignment due to lack of knowledge^(10, 11). Another point of view suggest that due to mild punishment categorized in various institutional policies, students are more inclined to plagiarize rather than staying away.⁽¹²⁾

Academic and Legal Penalties

Indulging in plagiarism is considered to be an act of serious misconduct which violates the basic principles of science, therefore in the scientific community it is severely treated and often becomes an unforgiving crime.⁽¹³⁾ This is rightly so because anyone who is involved in such an act of dishonesty particularly in medical sciences brings in disrepute and denying the credit to the real owner of the ideas and creative writing. Such actions therefore put his or her own professional career at risk, but also create a risk of making researchers deceptive. Broadly speaking, for this reason even a risk of outcomes which could be detrimental to health and life of individual and population would not be an over emphasis⁽¹⁴⁾.

The policy developed by the U.S. Office of Science and Technology has been implemented by most research-funding agencies, and academic institutes.⁽¹⁵⁾ It defines misconduct as indulgence in “fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results.” Further elaborating on these acts of misconduct the US federal agency statements continues by adding that all such actions which show considerable diversions from the honest behavior in recording and reporting, knowingly and which can be proven. Policies and guidelines of funding agencies and journals apply a much wider definition to misconduct to cover issues like breach of confidentiality in reviewing manuscripts and grant applications, denying credit and making wrong attribution in assigning authorship. Institutional response to allegations should be based on the guiding principles which are methodically similar in great majority of academic institution the world over. These usually follow institutional policy on misconduct. A thorough investigation by an independent committee which reports to the academic head of the entity with a provision to appeal is a policy adopted by many institutions. The seriousness of the offence is needed to be reviewed considering the nature and level along with the intention of the offender. The committee would make full assurance that the misconduct warrants a punishment as per institutional policy. Penalties are imposed as per policy of the institution which are based on the nature and gravity of the committed misconduct. These could vary from imposition of fine and a move to approach the journal editor with a complain to retract the

paper. In a very severe situation the individual could be denied his/her academic position and may be asked to leave the institution. Such decisions are not easy to reach as they can be challenged in the court of law. It is therefore very important that all evidences and witnesses are thoroughly checked before a decision is made public. Publicising the plagiarist's identity after the final decision is considered as one of the harshest penalty as it brings disgrace to individual who would find it extremely difficult to regain and enjoy the same reputation, he/she was enjoying before such a ruling was made against him. Before reprimanding the offender and imposing any penalty for an act of misconduct such as plagiarism, the seniors and experienced researchers and writers are bound to explain basic reasons why plagiarism warrants a punitive action.

Basic Puidelines to avoid Plagiarism

Most of the guidelines adopted by academic institutions tactlessly focus on the immoral aspect hence presenting it just as a grave sin which needs to be punished. While the other accompanying drawback that how plagiarism weakens one's own ability to refine skills of writing to document original thoughts and outcomes in research⁽¹⁰⁾ grossly impaired. It is therefore important that while creating awareness about plagiarism as a punishable offence, it is equally important to explain students and young scholars that how damaging it could be for their own career. Stressing to avoid plagiarism should not just be taken as a way to protect one's writing from being labeled as a forgery, but it should emphasize that by appropriately citing references and paraphrasing the text one can demonstrate how well read the author is and how strong are his/ her conceptual depths. The other positive aspect in citing references is that it provides the readers guidance from where additional information can be obtained.

Younger generation of scientists must be encouraged to attend seminars and meetings organized by professional bodies. A much greater benefit of attending such meetings is the interaction with experience scientists, who are much more cognizant of the impact of misconduct in research hence can guide and mentor younger and budding scientists to stay away from the evils of plagiarism. Their advices can help younger scientists to get-on imposing self-regulations to not only stay away from this evil but to report any suspected violation such as plagiarism, but this must be done after absolute confirmation and supporting proofs in hand. Just allegations without an absolute proof could be damaging and may ruin one's own reputation. Most important practical tip to avoid plagiarism is to avoid copy and paste from your own previous manuscripts, writing in your own words and cite everything taken from other sources. It is

useful to check your plagiarism index by internet based softwares which are available in many institutions. Many journals use softwares to detect plagiarism. Journal editorial staff also needs training on use, interpretation and implications of plagiarism report.

With the increase in awareness about misconduct in research in general and about plagiarism in particular, institutions in developing countries have now started implementing policy, and guidelines and organizing seminars to create awareness. Higher education bodies and journals are no more taking it lightly whenever a complaint is raised. We are witnessing stringent actions on part of regulatory bodies for institutions of higher education. In order to reduce the plagiarized material publishers of scientific journals have adopted various means including the use of software to scan the identical texts in articles⁽¹⁶⁾ In order to prevent publications of plagiarized material and dual publications editors of various professional journals have decided to deal such misconduct with punitive actions and imposing penalties and even asking for retraction of plagiarized articles⁽¹⁷⁾.

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Dr. Mohammad Wasay: Study concept and design, protocol writing, data collection, data analysis, manuscript writing, manuscript review

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