

EDITORIAL

Duplicate/redundant publications: quality should take precedence over quantity

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ABSTRACT

The ultimate purpose of research is 'advancement of knowledge'. All other motives should be secondary. However, that does not seem to be the practice. There are various forms of 'publication frauds', one such form is duplicate/redundant publications. According to Committee On Publication Ethics (COPE), issues related to authorship and duplicate publication are the most common types of ethical problems. Duplicate publication occurs when there is partial or complete duplication of data from the same piece of work without proper declaration. The practice was always there, and is on the rise. This editorial is written with an intention to increase awareness regarding this important issue.

Keywords: Duplicate publication; Redundant publication; Salami slicing; Overlapping publication; Text recycling; Self plagiarism

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I attended a research methodology workshop (targeted at postgraduate students and faculty), organized by a prestigious multinational pharmaceutical company with strong research background. One of the presenters, who happen to be a medical doctor, said "We, clinicians in India have such a huge patient database, why are we not publishing? Let us start documenting everything." I was very happy to hear that. Clinicians have some concerns such as 'commitment to patients', 'no time', 'deficient resources for research', etc. He suggested an easy way out; he said, "Have good data (in terms of number of patients and their clinical details), record everything, and after sometime from the same data you can have multiple publications." Now, this was something shocking for me. A presenter who was supposedly an 'expert in research methodology', from a 'prestigious research organization' was telling something which is not acceptable. He was basically 'encouraging salami publication' (a form of duplicate/redundant publication). I immediately pointed out (to him and also to the audience) that this is unacceptable as per international guidelines. To my relief, he agreed to my point of view and corrected himself. But, how many of us do that? We believe we know everything and fail to listen to others.

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Definition

'Redundant (or duplicate) publication is publication of a paper that overlaps substantially with one already published in print or electronic media.'^[1] According to Ibe,^[2] 'in duplicate publication, the papers usually differ only slightly in changes to the title, abstract (summary) and/or order of authors. In redundant publication, there is usually a somewhat different textual slant in the body of the paper from the original paper but the data are same. The differences often come in the forms of different interpretation of data or an introduction from a slightly different angle.'

Committee On Publication Ethics (COPE),^[3] describes redundant publication as follows: 'When a published work (or substantial sections from a published work) is/are published more than once (in the same or another language) without adequate acknowledgment of the source/cross-referencing/justification, OR, When the same (or substantially overlapping) data is presented in more than one publication without adequate cross-referencing/justification, particularly when this is done in such a way that reviewers/readers are unlikely to realise that most or all the findings have been published before.'

Salami Science means 'slicing of a data set in to several pieces called least publishable units.'^[4] When there are multiple small publications from a single study/project, it is called salami publication or salami slicing.^[5] It is a form of self-plagiarism.

Attitude of researchers towards duplicate publication

Yank and Barnes,^[6] did a land mark survey of editors and authors to assess their views regarding overlapping

and redundant publications. Both editors and authors agreed that redundant publications do occur, that it is unacceptable, and one of the important reasons being 'pressure to publish'. They also felt that appropriate action was not being taken. The authors concluded that there is a need to 'develop explicit guidelines that clarify points of contention and ambiguity regarding overlapping manuscripts.'

Berquist,^[7] did a questionnaire-based survey of 524 editors-in-chief of Wiley-Blackwell science journals regarding ethical issues related to publication. Sadly, the general level of concern among editors regarding these issues was low; however, redundant publication was the greatest concern.

What constitutes redundant publication?

Cho BK, et al,^{*[8]} define redundant publication as follows: 'i) The hypothesis is similar, ii) The numbers or sample sizes are similar, iii) The methodology is identical or nearly so, iv) The results are similar, v) At least 1 author is common to both reports, v) No or little new information is made available.

To classify as redundant publication all of points 1–6 must apply. An exception is publications in local or regional journals, abstracts at scientific meetings, or in languages other than English. The authors must bring all of these to editor's attention. The editors' judgement decides if points 1–6 apply for a specific case.'

****The excerpt has been reprinted with permission from Cho BK, et al. Ann Thorac Surg 2000; 69:663.***

^[8]

Extent of the problem

An article by Gotzsche,^[9] mentions how '31 trials comparing non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory drugs had generated 75 articles, with the majority of duplicates published in English and within one year of each other, but without any subsequent notice of duplicate publication.' Stefania, et al,^[10] did a retrospective analysis of published literature to estimate the amount of duplicate publications published between 1997 and 2000 in 70 ophthalmologic journals (indexed by Medline). The authors found 60 redundant articles, and 1.39% of the publications were redundant. The authors concluded that this may be the tip of the iceberg.

Errami and Garner,^[11] found as many as 200,000 duplicate articles in the Medline database, and commented that the number of duplicate publications is on a rise from 1975 to 2000. Wan Fook Cheung, et al,^[12] looked for duplicate publications in Archives of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery, Laryngoscope, and Clinical Otolaryngology. They concluded that over a span of 10 years, 'the incidence of duplicate publication has not significantly changed',

and this should be taken care of to preserve the standards of the journal.

Motives: why authors engage in this unethical practice?

Some authors consider this as a way of strengthening their curriculum vitae.^[6] We tend to judge a researcher/academician's capability based on the number of publications. Authors need to publish for various reasons, and this pressure forces them to republish the data. This is also considered by many as a form of academic recognition.^[13-16] When authors are caught, the reasons given are; unawareness, considering the overlap as insignificant, different audience (different speciality), etc.

Why this issue is so important?

Johnson,^[17] commented that their 'occurrence affects science and carries with it sanctions of consequence.' There is enormous pressure on editors to publish articles, especially space constraints. Hence, because of duplicate publications good quality manuscripts may not get a chance to get published.^[18] This may also violate copyright laws.^[19] Due to false claims, the authors' curriculum vita also gets distorted.^[20]

The most significant concern is that the duplicate publications may affect the way studies may be included, analysed and interpreted during meta-analysis, hence the evidence may be biased.^[21] Hence, the strength of evidence for or against a concept gets strong. We know that in the 'levels of evidence', systematic reviews and meta-analysis get topmost priority (level I evidence), and this may reflect in consensus guidelines (diagnosis and management). This ultimately hampers patient care. Also, every scientist or researcher wants to read science (not fiction) and that too original research, not something which he has already read somewhere.^[22] The journal's reputation is also at stake. Most of the editorial staff (including editors) is not paid for this job. Hence, there is wastage of time,^[2] and resources.

Is it possible to get caught?

Till few years back, researchers had to spend long time in libraries. But, with technological advancement, especially internet, researchers have everything at a click of button. This has advantages as well as disadvantages. The exchange of information, including scientific one is now easier. However, there is now increased breach of publication ethics.^[7] But, we should remember, that the same internet can land us up in trouble, as we can be easily caught.

What action is taken?

If detected, and the present paper is still under

consideration, it may be rejected.^[23] But, if the second paper is already published, the journal should publish a “notice of redundant publication”, which may get enlisted in NLM and other indexing engines.^[1, 23, 24] Few journals may refuse to accept future submissions for a period of time, and may share this information with the same speciality journals. They may also inform the authors’ institution.^[23]

Prevention:

The editorial policy committee of the Council of Science Editors,^[23] ‘Recommends that each journal have a clear policy regarding sole submission and the definition of redundant publication. Procedures should be developed to evaluate potential violations of such a policy; actions should be prescribed for cases in which a violation has been established. All of this information should be incorporated into the journal’s instructions for authors.’ Most of the journals now ask authors to declare that ‘their manuscript does not overlap substantially with their other articles.’ Some journals also require authors to submit copies of any overlapping articles. Editors should avoid undue delay in processing of manuscripts, as authors cannot wait for long.^[2] One of my manuscripts was kept in a reputed PubMed indexed journals’ manuscript submission system for more than a year. I did not get any acknowledgement from the editorial office regarding my submission. Also, there was no option for withdrawing my manuscript.

In doubt, authors should directly ask for editor’s advice, because he has the final word in this regard.^[22] Few journals provide reviewers access to Medline abstracts, this helps check for duplicate publication, and reviewers can inform editors regarding the same. Even ethics committees of the journals can use ‘related articles’ section of PubMed.^[25] Authors’ institutions should track all publications from the institutes, and take complaints against the authors seriously.^[6]

When is duplicate publication acceptable?

Again, there is a lot of controversy as to what is acceptable. Some researchers opine that if the previous publication was as an abstract of a scientific conference, it may not be considered as duplicate publication.^[4, 26] Multiple publications from same study sample are justified if each publication addresses a different research question, and they are adequately cross-referenced.^[2, 22] This should be explicitly declared in the covering letter as well as in the ‘materials and methods’ section of the paper.^[23, 27] Sometimes, editors of different journals may mutually agree to publish the same manuscript in their respective journals. It can be done with the agreement of the authors and the editors

of those journals.^[1]

CONCLUSION

Duplication publication is a ‘blatant disregard for professional and medical ethics.’^[6] Professions should define what is acceptable, monitor its members, and take action when there is violation of such norms.^[28] It is the responsibility of the editors to ensure ‘highest standards of scientific integrity’. However, authors should realise that the interest of society is more important their personal interest.^[2]

I commented in my earlier editorial that ‘Research should not be need based.’^[13] Let us do research for the sake of research, not just for recognition, that automatically follows. Let us focus on having quality publications, rather than on quantity. I feel so tempted to quote Radulescu,^[29] who was also cited by Abraham,^[25] ‘if you have but one great study, submit it in its best, most complete form to the most appropriate journal. Do not publish in instalments, do not publish it in variants, do not publish it more than once.’^[29] He has so eloquently put the message across!

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