

Egregious Plagiarism:

More than Misconduct

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On 17 January 2017, Christine Laine, editor-in-chief of *Annals of Internal Medicine*, reported that one of its external reviewers had stolen the contents of a manuscript sent to that reviewer for evaluation.¹ The reviewer later published the stolen content—text, tables, and figures, almost verbatim—in another journal, *EXCLI Journal*.²

By a stroke of luck, Michael Dansinger, the corresponding author of the original manuscript, had become aware of the theft and contacted *Annals*. Laine's subsequent investigations led to a confession of plagiarism by the external reviewer. She also contacted *EXCLI J* and the sponsoring institution of the fraudulent article. The journal retracted the plagiarized article²; the institution acknowledged receipt of the information but did not indicate what further action it might take.¹

In an exceptional twist to this case, the victim of the theft wrote a letter to the plagiarist.³ The letter appeared in the same issue as Laine's report¹ and said, in part,

It took 5 years from conceptualization of the study to publication of the primary analysis.⁴ This study was my fellowship project and required a lot of work. It took effort to find the right research team, design the study, raise the funds, get approvals, recruit and create materials for study participants, run the diet classes, conduct the study visits, compile and analyze the study data, and write the initial report. The work was funded by the U.S. government and my academic institution. The secondary analysis that you reviewed for *Annals* used specialized methods that took my colleagues many years to develop and validate. In all, this body of research represents at least 4,000 hours of work.

This episode—although amazingly brazen—is simply the latest example of ongoing dishonesty in the medical literature.³⁻⁸

Plagiarism^{9,10} aside, peer reviewers sometimes approve or reject an article simply because it favors or contradicts their own interests.¹¹⁻¹³ Their decisions also might be swayed by knowledge of who wrote the article.¹³ In some cases, they use ideas pilfered from articles that they have rejected.¹¹ And, occasionally, reviewers inappropriately share the contents of a study before its publication.^{14,15}

The man who stole Dansinger's paper is associated with the Center of Obesity and Eating Disorders, Stella Maris Mediterranean Foundation, in Potenza, Italy.^{2,16} The Foundation's president says that the man has received a "stern rebuke."¹⁶ Whether further action will be taken is unknown.

Discussants on the Internet have strong opinions on this matter. In the past, scientists guilty of lesser misconduct have had papers retracted, have lost access to government grants, and have been removed from academic posts.¹⁷ Dansinger believes that if the situation were reversed, he would lose his job, his academic credentials, his medical license, and his career as a scientist.¹⁶

Regrettably, predicting plagiarism is impossible, and its appropriate management continues to be problematic. In any case, one thing about plagiarism is certain: we can't stop it; we can only hope to contain it.

Dr. Fred is an Associate Editor of the Texas Heart Institute Journal. Dr. Scheid is retired from Rice University.

Reprints will not be available from the authors.

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