

# Violation of publication ethics in manuscripts: Analysis and perspectives

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Scientific journals are in existence for more than 300 years and their role is to further the progress of science by providing a platform to communicate new findings and the results of scientific research. Publication of articles is a kind of documentation and journals are one of the most powerful tools for documentation. After the advent of computers, electronic publication plays a major role in the field of science and medicine.<sup>[1]</sup> Publication process, like many other systems, has evolved a code of conduct which is called “publication ethics.” Publication Ethics may be defined as a self-regulatory mechanism insisting on integrity on the part of authors, peer reviewers and publishers to establish higher standards of editorial processing for the scholarly journals. Violation of publication ethics is a global problem which includes duplicate submission, multiple submissions, plagiarism, gift authorship, fake affiliation, ghost authorship, pressured authorship, salami publication and fraud (fabrication and falsification)<sup>[2,3]</sup> but excludes the honest errors committed by the authors. Plagiarism, multiple submission (submission of the same article to more than one journal) and duplicate submission (single manuscript submitted more than once to the same journal) are a few of the major issues faced by the authors of this article as the editors of biomedical journals. When a considerable amount of time is spent tackling these

issues, there is a waste of human resources and increase in office expenses. Apart from being unethical, multiple submissions can exaggerate the research findings, if the same article is published in different journals. Violation of publication ethics corrodes the integrity of science.<sup>[4]</sup> While monitoring the status of articles withdrawn from the Journal of Pharmacology and Pharmacotherapeutics, we noticed that a few of the submitted articles were published in other journals and the dates of submission in two journals were very close suggesting multiple submission. It prompted us to delve into the issue of violation of publication ethics committed by the authors contributing articles to a few journals published by the Inpharm Association. Hence, we planned to analyze the profile of unethical practices in three journals and suggest some possible reasons and remedies.

A retrospective analysis of scientific submissions to the *Journal of Pharmacology and Pharmacotherapeutics* (JPP), *Journal of Young Pharmacist* (JYP) and *Free-Radicals and Antioxidants* (FRA) with regard to violation of publication ethics was carried out. JPP, JYP and FRA are peer-reviewed scientific journals. The first two are supported by the Inpharm Association and the last one is supported by SciBiolMed and Phcog.Net. A total of 2675 manuscripts were received through online manuscript management system of JPP, JYP and FRA between January 2010 and December 2014 and 2575 manuscripts were included for the study. The articles submitted under the correspondence section were excluded from analysis. The manuscripts submitted by the authors were screened for plagiarism using the online tools such as Duplichecker and iThenticate. The reports of plagiarism generated by the software were verified manually to ensure plagiarism had actually taken place. An attempt was made to detect multiple

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submissions by checking with electronic search engines such as Google, Google Scholar, PubMed and Microsoft Academic Search for published titles which were similar or identical to the manuscripts withdrawn by the authors or rejected by the journal. When the similarities were confirmed manually, the submission date of publication elsewhere and the manuscript processing dates in the above journals were compared.

The total number of submissions analyzed was 2575. A total of 301 (16.96%) manuscripts contained some degree of plagiarism. Multiple submissions were detected with 35 (1.97%) manuscripts and an equal number of manuscripts were submitted as new submissions when the identical manuscripts were already in process in the same journal. Summary of author submissions, average days taken for review, average days taken for publication are

summarized in Table 1. The major reasons for rejection of manuscripts are plagiarism and inappropriate submission (not in scope, incomplete submission). A total of 486 manuscripts (27%) were rejected because they were not in the scope of the journal. Plagiarism was detected in 301 manuscripts (17%) which were rejected. Manuscripts which had minimal plagiarism were sent back to authors for modification and the revised ones were considered for further editorial process. Around 25% of manuscripts were rejected based on the recommendations of the reviewers and the editorial board members as they were not up to the standard set by the journals. Four manuscripts dealing with clinical studies did not produce any evidence of approval of the study by an ethics committee. The reasons for rejection of manuscripts submitted to JPP, JYP and FRA between January 2010 and December 2014 are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 1: Status of manuscript submissions to JPP, JYP and FRA**

Title of the Journal Year of publication → ↓Article phase	JPP					JYP					FRA				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total number of articles submitted	113	365	380	367	404	264	166	95	141	105	No submissions	47	53	175	Not included for analysis
Total number of articles rejected	81	264	275	262	288	180	108	47	96	43		**	**	131	
Average number of days taken for review	28	33	38	32	36	32	34	32	52*	29		50	50	63*	
Average number of days from receipt of revised manuscript to decision	24	26	21	19	51	36	19	8	28*	47		26	72	25*	
Average number of days from first submission to acceptance	82	109	158	93	121	158	106	122	80*	60		115	100	90*	
Average number of days from acceptance to publication	67	117	164	71	44	114	169	126	24*	40		30	35	28*	

\*Approximate days. \*\*Data were not included for analysis. JPP=Journal of Pharmacology and Pharmacotherapeutics, JYP=Journal of Young Pharmacist, FRA=Free-Radicals and Antioxidants

**Table 2: Reasons for rejection of manuscripts submitted to JPP, JYP and FRA between January 2010 to December 2014**

Reasons for rejection	Number of manuscripts rejected				Percentage
	JPP	JYP	FRA*	Total	
Multiple submission	28	5	2	35	1.97
Duplicate submission (resubmission)	27	10	-	37	2.08
Ethics committee permission not produced	5	-	-	5	0.28
Incomplete submission	1	-	-	1	0.06
Not in scope	423	24	39	486	27.38
Not prepared according to journal instructions	72	16	8	96	5.41
Revised article not submitted	84	80	18	182	10.25
Plagiarism	177	84	40	301	16.96
Rejected as recommended by referees/editors	241	210	-	451	25.41
Suggested to submit to other journals	4	20	13	37	2.08
Withdrawn by authors	108	25	11	144	8.11
Total	1170	474	131	1775	100

\*January 2011 to December 2013. JPP: Journal of Pharmacology and Pharmacotherapeutics, JYP: Journal of Young Pharmacist, FRA: Free-Radicals and Antioxidants

The major problems with respect to publication ethics were plagiarism and multiple submissions in the three journals. When the authors were challenged, many of them did not reply, and wrote back saying that they would like to withdraw the manuscript, claimed ignorance or blamed their lack of English language skills. Many authors had copied the text from published articles with citations and pasted them under the discussion section. To avoid delay in getting the manuscripts published, authors indulged in multiple submissions. ‘Multiple submissions’ is almost impossible to detect while the manuscript is being processed. When the manuscript is accepted in one journal, the authors withdraw the same manuscript from other journals stating that the manuscript processing cycle is too long for them to wait. When an author submits a manuscript to a scholarly journal, he/she declares that manuscript is currently not under consideration for publication elsewhere, but many do not hesitate to violate the declaration.

Submitting the same manuscript as a new submission to the same journal could be due to lack of knowledge or experience in operating the online submission system. This could be a manual error and can be rectified by the editor or one of the editorial staff during preliminary screening of the manuscript.

Sometimes authors provide unrelated or inappropriate affiliations which could not be verified. The institution where the work was carried out must be mentioned (on the byline) rather than the institution where the author is currently working. The address of the current work place can be given under the correspondence address or in the footnote.

When the authors failed to submit evidence of ethics committee permission on a few occasions, it was difficult to decide whether any violation of research ethics was involved. Authors should have in their possession, all the necessary source documents in original including the ethics committee permission letter (if applicable), data output sheets from the instruments, important communications and copies of the cited papers in the manuscript at least for a few years. The JPP editors have in the past asked a few authors to submit copies of the cited papers in their manuscript and the ethics committee permission letter.

The scientific publication process is by and large built on trust. The mechanisms currently put in place to detect the unethical practices cannot be foolproof. A cunning and more determined author can break the regulations and get away with it. More often than not the unethical publication practices come to light by chance rather than design to detect them. That calls for self-regulation on the part of the authors and journals should exhort them to follow

the code of conduct. However, that does not mean the journals should stop screening for the violation of code of publication. Authors have equal, if not more responsibility in maintaining the ethical standard of the existing publication process. Realization of this fact and playing their role with all sincerity and honesty will definitely bring down the instances of unethical publication practices. Authors should be made to realize “authorship implies not just credit but responsibility too”.

CASE: 1

Mr.X submitted a manuscript (case report) to JPP on 15/03/13. A decision to send it for revision was taken by JPP on 25/03/13. The author submitted the revised manuscript which was sent back to the author again for further corrections as the suggestions of the editorial board were not complied with. But the author never responded even after sending many reminders. Meanwhile one of the JPP editorial staff accidentally identified the article with the same title published in “Journal Y” by the same author. The manuscript was submitted to the above journal on 20/01/13. When the author was questioned he

Important dates	Manuscript processing timeline in JPP	Manuscript processing timeline in Journal Y
Date of submission	15-Mar-2013	20-Jan-2013
Technical modification	21-Mar-2013	--
Sent for revision	25-Mar-2013	--
Revised manuscript received and sent for revision	25-Jul-2013	--
Date of decision	--	25-Mar-2013
Date of acceptance	--	12-Jul-2013
Date of web publication	--	6-Sep-2013
Manuscript withdrawal request received	03-Dec-2013	

JPP=Journal of Pharmacology and Pharmacotherapeutics



Figure 1: Reply from author regarding withdrawal of manuscript from JPP

responded after a month by simply sending a withdrawal request [Figure 1]. Timeline history of submission of Mr. X in “Journal Y” and JPP are as follows:

## COMMENT

The author submitted a manuscript to JPP when it was under consideration elsewhere. This amounted to violation of publication ethics.

## CASE: 2

Mr. X submitted a case report which was published in 2013. After the publication of the article, one of the readers pointed out that it was plagiarized and the data were copied from a previously published article. When the author was queried it was revealed that the work was not carried out in the hospital where he was affiliated but in the one where he worked previously. But this fact was not mentioned in the article. The article was retracted because of plagiarism and inappropriate author affiliation.

## COMMENT

A manuscript should present the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The author not only plagiarized the article but failed to give the details of the place where the work was carried out and his failure led to the assumption that the work was done in the hospital of his affiliation given in the article.

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