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Editorial: Editorial stance on duplicate and salami publication

ALISON Y. FIRTH

In this edition of the *British Orthoptic Journal* the notice to contributors has been amended. The sentence ‘Papers are considered for publication on the understanding that they are not being submitted elsewhere at the same time’ has been extended to address the problem of duplicate publication and now appears under ‘Terms of submission’.

Duplicate publication is the ‘publication in two or more scientific journals of seemingly identical or closely related articles of similar content’ and is considered as unethical.¹ Stewart and Feder² raised the issue of ‘republication’ in 1987, and since then duplicate publication has been discussed in over 70 editorials, numerous letters to journals and a few articles. However, to my knowledge, apart from a notice concerning a duplicate publication,³ it does not appear to have been addressed in journals directly related to our speciality.

One particular concern that arises from duplicate publication is when a meta-analysis* is undertaken. Where the dual publication is not recognised, inclusion of both papers in the analysis will result in excessive weight of the study.⁴ It also leads to confusion in reporting of numbers of rare conditions, not to mention the wasted time of referees and the expense of the review process and actual printing costs.⁵ It can suggest that a certain study or finding has more importance than it does.

As Rogers⁶ eloquently puts it, ‘previously published means previously published in any language, previously published anywhere in the world, previously published in part or in whole, previously published in print or on electronic media, previously published regardless of whether that publication is listed in the *Index Medicus*, and previously published with or without the requirement for signing a transfer of copyright.’ I might add, to clarify further, this includes papers that have appeared in transactions of meetings and is irrespective of whether the publication has been peer reviewed.

A statement by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors⁷ addresses the issue of publication in the same or another language in other countries. The Committee feels that this can be of benefit provided certain conditions are adhered to. These are:

1. ‘The editors of both journals concerned are fully informed and approve; the editor concerned with the secondary publication must have a photocopy, reprint, or manuscript of the primary version.
2. The priority of the primary publication is respected by

a publication interval of at least 1 week (unless specifically negotiated otherwise by both editors).

3. The paper for secondary publication is intended for a different group of readers; an abbreviated version could be sufficient.
4. The secondary version reflects faithfully the data and interpretations of the primary version.
5. A footnote on the title page of the secondary version informs readers, peers, and documenting agencies that the paper has been published in whole or in part and states the primary reference. A suitable footnote might read as follows: “This article is based on a study first reported in the (title of journal, with full reference).” ’

It seems a common misconception that transactions of meetings are exempt from all laws of copyright or ethical issues surrounding dual publication. It may be annoying to see ‘Paper published elsewhere’ in the transactions of a meeting, but this is a correct procedure to avoid duplicate publication when the work has been submitted or accepted for publication elsewhere. Perhaps some confusion has arisen from published abstracts. In this situation, where only an abstract has been published, the paper may be submitted in full. It is, however, good practice to inform the editor of the existence of the abstract.

A common justification put forward by authors is that a second publication is necessary to reach a different audience, but this is not felt to be justified, particularly in view of today’s improved communications and the internet; nor is it scientifically warranted.⁸

When duplicate publications are recognised different approaches are taken. The journal may publish a notice, it may request a letter of apology from the author(s) for publication or it may ban the author(s) from publishing in the journal for a given period of time.

Another ethical problem in scientific conduct is that of salami-slicing. This is ‘the practice of cutting up a body of data to yield several papers where one complete paper would be optimal’.⁹ This may add to the number of publications by an author but reduces the quality. Exceptions here are large clinical or epidemiological studies where simultaneous publication of results is not possible, or where different and important questions need to be addressed separately.¹⁰ Indeed Bennie and Lim¹¹ state that few megatrials can afford to investigate only one hypothesis at a time. However, instances of clear misconduct do arise. In one editorial¹² a paper is discussed where the authors had been asked for further information on a given aspect. This was not included in their resubmission but the paper was accepted. However, it later came to light that the information was concurrently available and published in another journal. No cross-references were given and the content of the articles was otherwise similar.

* A secondary statistical analysis performed on the outcomes of independent studies.

In this same area are ‘meat extender’ articles where patients are added to an earlier identical series with the same results and conclusions.⁵

When submitting a manuscript where there is any question of duplication or salami-slicing, authors should draw the attention of the Editor to previous publications, submissions and/or abstracts. Clear reference should be made to any previous or expected future publications in the article submitted and copies supplied to the Editor.

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