Reviewer Turned Thief: The Peer Review Process At Its Worst

By Julianna LeMieux — December 15, 2016

When submitting a scientific manuscript to a journal for review, it is safe to say that the worst possible outcome imaginable for most scientists is that it will be rejected.

However, a far worse outcome is indeed possible - and it happened to Dr. Michael Dansinger.

Like any other physician or scientist who is trying to publish their results, Dr. Dansinger submitted his manuscript (entitled “One-Year Effectiveness of the Atkins, Zone, Weight Watchers, and Ornish Diets for Increasing Large High-Density Lipoprotein Particle Levels: A Secondary Analysis of a Randomized Trial”) to the Annals of Internal Medicine to undergo the peer-review process. (If you would like a refresher on how the peer-review process works, please read a description of it here [1] in my article, "How Data Become Science.")

And, like any other physician, Dr. Dansinger received the manuscript back with a "rejected" stamp on it. Although that is never easy to swallow, as scientists, it is part of the territory.

What is not part of the territory is to come across an incredibly similar (almost exact) manuscript as the one that you submitted a year later, published in another journal with someone else’s name on it.

But, that is exactly what happened to Dr. Dansinger. The plagiarized paper [2] was published in EXCLI journal Experimental and Clinical Sciences [3].

Because peer-review is done anonymously (the author of the manuscript does not know who the reviewers are,) Dansinger did not know if one of the authors on the new paper could have also acted as one of the reviewers of his original paper, a year earlier. Therefore, he contacted the Annals of Internal Medicine
to see if they could connect the dots. Indeed, when they looked into the original reviewers for his paper, there was a match between a reviewer for Dansinger’s manuscript and one of the authors of the newly published paper. More, when that person was contacted by Annals, they admitted their guilt.

The paper is now retracted and the corresponding author (who is not necessarily the plagiarizer) wrote a letter [4], saying, "As corresponding author I ask for retraction of our article Finelli et al. (2016) with the consent of all co-authors, because of unauthorized reproduction of confidential content of another manuscript."

Another letter was written, this time by Dr. Michael Dansinger, and published in Annals of Internal Medicine. In it, he addresses the plagiarizer directly, although without naming them. He writes,

As you must certainly know, stealing is wrong. It is especially problematic in scientific research. The peer-review process depends on the ethical behavior of reviewers. Physicians and patients depend on the integrity of the process. Such cases of theft, scientific fraud, and plagiarism cannot be tolerated because they are harmful and unethical.

It is hard to understand why you would risk so much. Whether the pressure to publish is so intense, or whether the culture where you work is relatively permissive such that plagiarism is not taken as seriously, or whether getting caught seemed unlikely—it is hard to imagine why you would take this chance.

Lastly, Dansinger asks the plagiarizer,

"I hope you will not steal anyone else’s research in the future. Instead, perhaps there is some way you can assist the scientific community’s efforts to reverse the growing epidemic of plagiarism and scientific fraud. Helping to raise awareness of the problem and identifying potential solutions would be positive steps in the right direction."

And, although I am not the one that this letter was addressed to, I hope that by highlighting this case, we are helping do exactly that.

Notes:

1. The full letter can be found here [5].
References:
http://retractionwatch.com/2016/12/12/dear-peer-reviewer-stole-paper-authors-worst-nightmare/#comments

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