

Who watches the watchmen? How to avoid that valuable use of anti-plagiarism tools shift into a witch-hunt

Dear Readers,

The Journal of Applied Oral Science is proud to announce the addition of anti-plagiarism procedures to its editorial routine.

The commitment of the JAOS with scientific community with research integrity, which includes ensuring content originality, is in line with the adoption of specific anti-plagiarism by a growing number of Journals and Publishers. As a result of an initiative started by the former JAOS Editor-In-Chief, Carlos F. Santos, the anti-plagiarism software iThenticate is now an additional tool integrated to the Scholar One system to assist JAOS Editors and Associated-Editors to improve the peer-review process.

The benefits of anti-plagiarism policies are noteworthy to all involved in the publishing chain, from authors to readers, and the significant development (and application) of tools to make such policies effective, such as iThenticate, indicates that such procedures are becoming an essential part of the high quality review (and publication) standards. However, despite the recent and exponential growing, we must remember that anti-plagiarism policies and tools are relatively naïve and are still in development, and the truthful use demands prudence.

As an author, my first experience with an anti-plagiarism tools worth to be mentioned. After submitting a manuscript to a major publisher journal, I was confronted with a message alleging that a high percentage of homology (the word plagiarism was never used) was detected and that the review process only could be continued after a major revision of the manuscript. After my request, I had access to the assumed 'homology' detected, and was informed that the journal had established a given percentage of acceptable 'homology' in the submitted manuscript, which in theory sounds really reasonable.

However, surprisingly the 'homology' report revealed that even author's names, institutions and addresses were a considerable part of the claimed 'homology'. Sequences of five (or less) words were also considered 'homology' with previously published content, and were included in the overall 'homology' percentage. Even generic sentences such 'our results demonstrated that...' and 'p values <0.05 were considered statistically significant...', probably existent in thousands of published manuscripts, contributed to the 'homology' count. Materials and methods section content, even with the proper mention to the previous studies of our own group using the same methods, was massively computed as 'homologous'.

The misuse of the anti-plagiarism tool became obvious and a letter to the Editor put the manuscript back on review without a single change, but at the cost of an additional week to the review process and the exposition of a complete absence of common sense in the use of anti-plagiarism tool data by the Editor, Journal and Publisher. The situation was repeated few weeks later with another manuscript, submitted to a different journal of a different publisher. Indeed, several colleges have experienced similar situations.

As an editor, my first experience with an anti-plagiarism tool was mostly molded by my unpleasant experience as an author in order to avoid such mistakes. It is possible (and really easy) to exclude from the analysis the title page, as well entire sections such as Materials and Methods and References. A series of parameters can be adjusted, to avoid that very short words sequences (which are not even complete sentences) or generic statements (remember the 'p values <0.05 were considered statistically significant' example) being interpreted as plagiarism. The Paracelsus toxicology keystone states that 'the dose makes it either a poison or a remedy' and this is the case for using (or misusing) anti-plagiarism tools. At this time, Editorial teams must be aware and fully engaged in determining the correct dose of anti-plagiarism procedures.

It also important to remember that the concept of plagiarism goes beyond sequences of similar words. The action or practice of taking someone else's ideas or work and passing it off without crediting the source, or presenting them as new and original also constitute plagiarism. While the advent of anti-plagiarism tools represents a remarkable advance in the peer-review process, all the other aspects of the broad plagiarism definition must be considered along peer-review.

In conclusion, the JAOS is proud to step forward and improve the peer-review process with the adoption of the iThenticate in the editorial routine, and it is committed with the wise application of anti-plagiarism policies, in order to avoid that a valued initiative becomes an irrational witch-hunt.

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