

Editorial

Duplicate publication: a cautionary tale

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Introduction

In June 2003, a possible case of duplicate publication involving this journal (JAC) and the *American Journal of Medicine* (AJM) was brought to our attention by AJM and, shortly afterwards, independently by a member of JAC's Editorial Board.

The JAC article concerned [JAC (2003) 51, 1261–8]¹ is entitled 'Risk factors and treatment outcomes in osteomyelitis' and appeared in the May issue having been published online on 28 March 2003. The AJM article [AJM (2003) 114, 723–8]² is entitled 'Outcomes of osteomyelitis among patients treated with outpatient parenteral antimicrobial therapy' and appeared in the 15 June 2003 issue. After a preliminary examination of the articles both journals felt that an explanation should be sought from the authors.

The authors explained that a precursor to these articles had been submitted to a third journal. This journal had rejected the article, but in its rejection advice had suggested that the paper might be better split into two articles, each addressing one of the main audiences that would be interested in the results. The authors took this advice and prepared the two papers that were subsequently submitted to and accepted for publication by JAC and AJM. However, neither submission cross-referenced the other and neither journal was provided with a copy of the submission that had been made to the other. Copies of such material are expressly requested in the JAC Instructions to authors, and in the advice provided by most scientific journals.

What is duplicate publication?

Duplicate publication is a subset of redundant publication. In their *Guidelines on Good Publication Practice*,³ the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) define redundant publication as '...when two or more papers, without full cross reference, share the same hypothesis, data, discussion points, or conclusions.' The defining characteristic of a duplicate publication is that, in addition to the above, it shares at least some of the same authors.

Why is duplicate publication a bad thing?

Duplicate publication is unacceptable because it has the potential to skew the evidence base. If publication of the same data is not openly acknowledged, readers will reasonably assume that two different studies are being described and are likely to place greater reliance on evidence that appears to have been corroborated in more than one

study. It can also affect the outcomes of meta-analyses used to establish best practice.⁴

Conclusions

In the above specific case involving this journal and AJM, after an investigation by the Editor-in-Chief (EIC) and Chairman of the Editorial Board (CEB) of JAC, it was concluded that there was an unacceptable degree of unacknowledged overlap between the two papers and therefore this did constitute a case of duplicate publication.

However, given the authors' explanation, JAC has elected to take the view that the duplicate publication was not intended to deceive and that the authors had embarked on this course of action after advice from another journal. The EIC and CEB therefore decided that, apart from the publication of this article bringing the incident and issue to the attention of readers and authors, no further action would be taken against the authors. Authors should be aware, however, that a wide range of sanctions are available and can include one or more of banning authors from submitting to the Journal for a specified time period, informing the authors' employers or professional body and requesting an investigation, informing other journals, and publishing a rebuke. JAC has banned other authors from submission in the past.

AJM's conclusions and action have already been published,⁵ along with a letter of apology by the authors.⁶

How to avoid getting into difficulties

There are two keys for authors to avoid getting into this type of situation: (i) Awareness. Be aware of the issues of redundant/duplicate publication and ask yourself whether what you intend to do could be construed as duplicate or redundant publication; and (ii) Openness. Cite other publications, or if as in this case the material is as yet unpublished, make sure you comply with journals' stipulations that you supply copies of any relevant unpublished papers. This will enable the editors to advise on the best course of action. If you are in any doubt about your position, seek advice.

References

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