Dear Plagiarist: A Letter to a Peer Reviewer Who Stole and Published Our Manuscript as His Own

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Dr. Doctor,

I am aware that you recently admitted to wrongly publishing, as your own, a scientific research paper that I had submitted to Annals of Internal Medicine. After serving as an external peer reviewer on our manuscript, you published that same manuscript in a different medical journal a few months later. You removed the names of the authors and the research site, replacing them with the names of your coauthors and your institution.

It took 5 years from conceptualization of the study to publication of the primary analysis (1). This study was my fellowship project and required a lot of work. It took effort to find the right research team, design the study, raise the funds, get approvals, recruit and create materials for study participants, run the diet classes, conduct the study visits, compile and analyze the study data, and write the initial report. The work was funded by the U.S. government and my academic institution. The secondary analysis that you reviewed for Annals used specialized methods that took my colleagues many years to develop and validate. In all, this body of research represents at least 4000 hours of work. When you published our work as your own (2), you were falsely claiming credit for all of this work and for the expertise gained by doing it.

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. Those who engage in such behavior can typically expect their professional careers to be ruined: Loss of reputation, loss of employment, and ineligibility for future research funding are the norm. Coauthors are also collaborators in the fraud, and such losses potentially apply to them as well. All the previous publications of those who steal others’ work become suspect, and it reflects poorly on their training institutions, current employers, collaborators, and mentors.

It is hard to understand why you would risk so much. You have no doubt worked hard to become a physician and scientist. I know that you have published many research papers. It just doesn’t make sense. 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.

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.

From Tufts Medical Center, Boston, Massachusetts.

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References

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