Editorial

Other men's (and women's) flowers

The front page of an anthology of poems collected by Lord Wavell carries a charming quotation from Montaigne: 'I have gathered a posie of other men's flowers and nothing but the thread that binds them is my own'. In this Journal we collect research papers, rather than flowers, but there is increasing pressure on researchers, and editors, to ensure that the ownership of the research is correctly ascribed. Ideally research will be promptly and clearly reported in an appropriate journal and correctly attributed to the people who did the research. We hope that this is usually what actually happens.

However, sometimes mistakes are made. In this issue we (and also the Editors of the International Journal of Obesity) have the unpleasant task of retracting a paper which was, without the knowledge of the editors, submitted to, and published by, both journals. Some may ask why multiple publication is such a crime: if the data are correct and interesting, why not present them to as large a public as possible?

There are several answers to this question. From the viewpoint of the reader, who tries to keep abreast of the literature in the field, multiple publication means that he has to scan more journals to collect the same amount of information. For the editor and reviewers, time is wasted assessing and improving a paper which is meanwhile having the same work done by other people for another journal. Those who maintain bibliographic databases, or attempt meta-analyses in the field, are confused: does the second paper refer to the same series of people with a given condition or a different one? Those who use citation indices as a measure of the research output of an individual or an institution are confused: do these two publications represent two research programmes, or merely two descriptions of the same research programme? For all of these reasons contributors to this journal are asked to sign a letter confirming that they have not submitted the paper elsewhere, and will not do so while it is under consideration by this journal. To dissuade authors from such misconduct, COPE (the Committee on Publication Ethics) suggests that authors who deliberately violate this condition should be barred from publication in the journals concerned for a period of two years.

Other problems are more difficult to resolve. For example, in Volume 49 of this journal we published an excellent review of the epidemiological evidence on the association between dietary fat and obesity. Two years later, in a supplement to the International Journal of Obesity, a review was published on a similar topic. In the opinion of an independent referee, who

was asked to examine the second paper for possible plagiarism, a substantial part of the text and associated figures were very similar. Of course two reviews about the same topic will draw on the same pool of evidence, so overlapping references are to be expected, just as two people gathering flowers from the same area will make similar collections. However it would be expected that the way in which data were arranged and interpreted would differ, so the second reviewer could truthfully claim 'the thread that binds them is my own'.

So how can a conscientious worker escape a charge of plagiarism if he reviews an area which has been previously reviewed? The answer, if the previous review was comprehensive, and he has no new insight to offer, is that the field is not yet suitable for another review. If parts of the field have already been well covered, but other parts have not, then it is up to the latest reviewer to cite and summarise the previous review as concisely as possible, and move on to the part where he has new data, or new interpretations to suggest.

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses present a particularly difficult problem concerning citation and ownership of data. A good meta-analysis may be a superb synthesis of current knowledge in a field, and if so it will be more frequently cited than any individual study in the field. But the meta-analyst may not have contributed a single datum point by his own experimental work, but relied entirely on the published (or unpublished) work of other people, so it seems unjust that all the credit should go to the florist who presents the magnificent bouquet, and none to the gardeners who grew the flowers.

The volume of bio-medical literature is now so great that it threatens to overwhelm the serious scholar in any but the smallest specialist field. Publications are not only a means of sharing findings with fellow-scientists: they are also the currency with which academic promotion and funding is purchased. It is the responsibility of authors of papers to ensure that they give proper credit to other investigators upon whose published work they have built their own research: failure to make such proper citations is in effect stealing the credit for the work of others, by implying that it is your own work. Duplicate publication or plagiarism may be detected by search of electronic databases, or by attentive readers who notify the editors of suspected abuses. Researchers, reviewers, readers and editors must work together to see that a high standard of publication ethics is maintained. We would be interested to hear your views on this topic, in the form of a letter suitable for publication.

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European Journal of Clinical Nutrition

J-P Després
IA Macdonald
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International Journal of Obesity