



Cornell University®

2016
Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) Symposium:
Plagiarism

CASE STUDIES

Case 1: Maurice LaCroix: Plagiarism in a publication

(Modified from: <http://www.research.umn.edu/ethics/pdf/PlagiarismB7.htm>)

Maurice LaCroix, a postdoctoral fellow at a research-intensive veterinary college, was asked by faculty member Dr. Frank Hardy to co-author an in-depth review article on hemolytic anemias for a leading medical journal. Publishing this chapter was important for Maurice because it would establish his credibility in the field and give him professional exposure. Maurice felt that preparation of this chapter would be easy because he would be referring substantially to his own recent research and to that of Dr. Hardy's laboratory. He had all the data and papers on disk. Maurice was first author; his postdoctoral mentor Dr. Hardy was the corresponding author.

Shortly after the issue appeared, Dr. Hardy was called by Dr. John Barrett, a colleague and co-author on many papers that Maurice and Dr. Hardy previously published jointly. "You and Maurice plagiarized me," he said. "You have no right to extract whole passages from our papers without quotation marks, even if you did reference the papers in the text. It's as though my contribution never existed. You should have specifically acknowledged the directly quoted text or made me a co-author of the review. Besides, you need permission from the publisher to reprint material verbatim."

Maurice was shocked when he heard this. He looked back at the review and papers and found that he indeed had utilized whole sentences from the papers and one whole paragraph describing the methods. However, although the three individuals had collaborated, it was Maurice who actually wrote the sections in question and who submitted the papers in which they were contained. In addition, he had been the corresponding author on two of the key papers.

Maurice called Dr. Barrett to apologize and indicated that there are only so many ways to say the same thing. Unmollified, Dr. Barrett said that he planned to call the editor of the journal and inform him of the plagiarism.

Discussion Questions:

- Do you believe Maurice's actions constituted plagiarism?
- To what extent were Maurice and Dr. Hardy each responsible for the contents of the chapter? Could Dr. Hardy be held responsible for the situation that developed?
- Dr. Barrett asked the corresponding author Dr. Hardy to rectify the situation. How do you suggest Dr. Hardy should proceed?
- Assume that Dr. Hardy brought the matter to the attention of the vet school dean. If you were the dean how would you handle it? If Maurice admitted to inadvertent plagiarism, what kind of sanctions would you, as dean, be inclined to consider?
- Was Dr. Barrett's complaint legitimate? Is including him as a co-author a solution to the plagiarism issue?
- If you were the journal editor and received a letter from Dr. Barrett describing the situation given in the case, what would you do?
- If Maurice had copied sentences from papers on which he was not an author, how would that change your interpretation of the issues in this case?

Case 2: Arthur Dornfeld: Plagiarism of Ideas

Arthur Dornfeld is a senior researcher at University X, whose lab studies development, using chick embryos and chick cells in culture as a model system. As is common in the experimental sciences, Dornfeld frequently reviews manuscripts submitted for publication. He agrees to review a manuscript for a prestigious journal. The manuscript uses the mouse model system to study an aspect of eye development that is closely related to the topic focused on by his own laboratory. The manuscript reports findings on a particular gene called mBRK, showing that it plays a central role in development of the eye. This is clearly a very important and novel finding, and although Dornfeld writes in his review that the authors should do a few more controls, he writes to the editor that he is in favor of publishing the manuscript once these controls are carried out.

Dornfeld has a graduate student working in his lab, Samantha Long. She is studying eye development in the chick, but has not been making much progress. He explains to her about the mBRK gene reported to be critical in the mouse system, and then tells her to obtain the equivalent chicken gene cBRK (for example by amplification from chicken DNA), and then to see if the same potentially exciting results also hold in the chicken system. Having recently attended an RCR workshop, Samantha raises the question: is it proper to use unpublished findings to further her own research? Dr. Dornfeld responds that since the lab that submitted the manuscript does not work in the chicken system, and since the mouse result no doubt will be published and thus publicly available in a few months anyway, there is nothing unethical about applying the knowledge from this manuscript to Samantha's own research.

Discussion Questions:

- Is Dr. Dornfeld's mentoring of Samantha Long appropriate?
- What should she do?
- Under what circumstances, if any, might it be acceptable to use the information described in the manuscript for Samantha's research?

Suppose the scenario above is slightly different: Dr. Dornfeld, instead of reviewing a manuscript submitted for publication, is reviewing a grant application for the NIH, and the application proposes the novel hypothesis that gene mBRK plays an essential role in eye development, based on some preliminary and unpublished evidence obtained in the applicant's laboratory. In this scenario, he again explains the results to student Samantha and asks her to take up similar work in their own chicken system.

Discussion Questions:

- How is this scenario different from the one above?
- Is Dornfeld plagiarizing someone else's ideas?
- If Samantha feels that her PI's guidance is ethically wrong, what should she do?
- Underlying all of these specific questions is the general question, when does following up on someone else's ideas become plagiarism?