Guidance on research and publication ethics in Europe

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Background

Hungarian president resigns over doctorate plagiarism scandal

Prominent Dutch Cardiovascular Researcher Fired for Scientific Misconduct

Romanian prime minister accused of plagiarism

University Revokes German Research Minister's Doctorate
Guidance?
Results

• Methodology:
  ▪ Extensive internet search
  ▪ National bio-ethics committees (WHO); national academies of sciences (ALLEA); national frameworks
  ▪ National association of universities or expert

• More then 340 e-mails were sent

• Received replies from 30 out of the 31 target countries
Results

• Inclusion: English, French, German, Dutch or Italian

• 19 of the 31 countries included
  (= 87% of total research output of target population)

• 49 guidance documents

• 90% were published between 2002 and 2012
Results

• The number of words ranged from 139 to 57287 words (median: 2467 words, 25th-75th percentile: 1377-5795)

• International and national heterogeneity: origins and content
Results

Themes discussed:

• Defining of research integrity and research misconduct

• Is research integrity important? → trust and reputation

• Threats towards research integrity

• Factors influencing misconduct: competition
Results

- Detecting research misconduct
- Dealing with allegations of misconduct
- Prevention: training and education
  - Content? Format? Timing? Frequency?
  - Who can teach? Who should learn?*

## Different approaches

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<th>Negative approach: actions included in clear definitions of misconduct</th>
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Publication Issues
Why publish?

• Researchers are obliged to disseminate their results to the wider research society or society in general.

• Publication is valued as an intrinsic part of research.

• Research: risks - potential benefits (e.g. medical or scientific advances) Placing participants at risk without the opportunity for any benefit, is unethical.
Why publish?

- Originality and quality = more important than producing results quickly or publishing as much as possible, especially as a criterion for:
  - earning academic degrees
  - career advancement
  - allocation of resources
  - the assessment of research performance
Authorship

- Only 7 of the 19 countries refer to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors

- Author: a creative contribution

- Latvian guideline emphasizes creativity, however:

  “Only on the author’s (or authors’) own initiative, by tradition, the leader of the scientific school (or the scientific advisor) can be mentioned as a co-author, putting his surname as the last one.”
Authorship

• Link between authorship and responsibility

• No agreement exists on what the authors are responsible for. Authors are responsible for the integrity of:
  
  ▪ the entire project
  ▪ the work
  ▪ honesty in research
  ▪ the published content

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Authorship

• Definition of misconduct:
  - Heterogeneity
  - Fabrication, falsification, plagiarism

• Fabrication, falsification and plagiarism
  = most serious forms of misconduct

• Several guidelines: gradation in definition of misconduct
  → serious forms of misconduct vs less serious forms
Authorship

The following forms of misconduct concerning publication and authorship are explicitly condemned by several guidelines:

- Selective publication of desirable results
- Ghost authorship
- Honorary or gift authorship

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Authorship

Plagiarism:

• Many actions may be considered to constitute plagiarism: coping long text passages without attribution, up to careless or even inadvertent use of the ideas of someone else.

• Unlike fabrication and falsification, plagiarism “is supposed to be more injurious to fellow scientists than to science as such.” (European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity)
Authorship

• An Irish guideline: “the European approach”

• Only one guideline also made this normative qualification:

“(…) cases of misconduct related to falsification of research results are much more dangerous to science and its structures than plagiarism, which is easier to detect.”

(Polish guideline)
Authorship

• This normative qualification implies that a scientific finding is not less true when it is plagiarized

• Focus on (possible) impact of certain actions on science

• Following the same logic, continued carelessness, might be considered as serious as fabrication

• Who can assess long or short term impact? Who can determine the intention?
Detecting research misconduct
Peer review

- Peer review is valued as a crucial part of research and for safeguarding research integrity

- Reviewers should act with the greatest integrity, objectivity and thoroughness
Peer review

• Peer review is considered to be necessary, but insufficient

• Effective?

  ▪ reviewers do not have the original data nor the time to verify the results
  ▪ the review process, like the whole of science, depends on trust
  ▪ the volume of manuscripts: difficult to find willing and competent reviewers or referees
Conclusion
Conclusion

- Heterogeneity results in a confusing situation

- Need for harmonisation?
  - Several international initiatives
  - ESF European Code of Conduct vs. Hungarian guidance document

- Difficulty to retrieve the guidance documents
Conclusion

• The confusing situation hampers international research

• Ever more guidance documents, ever more heterogeneity?

• Researcher as a tightrope walker
Conclusion
Thank you for your attention

- Prof Kris Dierickx
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