What to do if you suspect plagiarism

(a) Suspected plagiarism in a submitted manuscript

Reviewer informs editor about suspected plagiarism

Thank reviewer and say you plan to investigate
Get full documentary evidence if not already provided

Check degree of copying

Clear plagiarism (unattributed use of large portions of text and/or data, presented as if they were by the plagiarist)

Minor copying of short phrases only (e.g. in discussion of research paper from non-native language speaker)
No misattribution of data

Redundancy (i.e. copying from author’s own work) – see flowcharts on redundancy

No problem

Discuss with reviewer

Author responds

No response

Attempt to contact all other authors (check Medline/Google for emails)

Satisfactory explanation (honest error/journal instructions unclear/very junior researcher)

No response

Contact author’s institution requesting your concern is passed to author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance

Write to author (all authors if possible) rejecting submission, explaining position and expected future behaviour

Consider informing author’s superior and/or person responsible for research governance and/or potential victim

Unsatisfactory explanation/admits guilt

Write to author (all authors if possible) rejecting submission, explaining position and expected future behaviour

Inform author(s) of your action

Write to author (all authors if possible) rejecting submission or requesting revision, explaining position and expected future behaviour

Inform reviewer of outcome/action

If no response, keep contacting institution every 3–6 months
If no resolution, consider contacting other authorities, e.g. ORI in US, GMC in UK

Contact corresponding author in writing, ideally enclosing signed authorship statement (or cover letter) stating that submitted work is original/the author’s own and documentary evidence of plagiarism

Contact author in neutral terms/expressing disappointment/explaining journal’s position
Ask author to rephrase copied phrases or include as direct quotations with references
Proceed with review

What to do if you suspect plagiarism

Note

The instructions to authors should include a definition of plagiarism and state the journal’s policy on it

Developed for COPE by Liz Wager of Sideview (www.lizwager.com) © 2013 Committee on Publication Ethics First published 2006
A non-exclusive licence to reproduce these flowcharts may be applied for by writing to: cope_administrator@publicationethics.org

publicationethics.org