Duplicate publication—what’s going up must come down

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The European Heart Journal—Case Reports (EHJ-CR) has in its first few years of publication noted a large increase in the submission of manuscripts which, if accepted, would lead to duplicate publication. A journal publishing case reports may be particularly vulnerable to this illicit activity because authors are often relatively less experienced. However, in some instances, it is quite clear that the activity is dishonest. Although the journal website and the instruction to authors clearly describe and prohibit duplicate publications and plagiarism, this unacceptable practice is rife.

Case reports present a number of unique circumstances that are generally not present in more complex articles types (e.g. original research articles). In particular, due to the short-reporting format, the major aspects of a clinical case can be described in abstract form resulting in very limited benefit to the scientific community for further publication of the case.

We have noted a variety of circumstances that may lead to duplicate publication, most of which fall into one of five categories. In general, these require a robust response from the target journal and potentially from the author’s host institution.

1. The submission of one article (flagrantly or unwittingly) to two or more journals before the article is accepted by one journal or after at least one article is accepted but not published, or after one article is already published constitutes an attempt at duplicate (or simultaneous) publication. There may be similar or different lead or corresponding authors, but the author list is usually identical, mostly consisting of no more than one or two authors since this is clearly a serious misdemeanour when articles have already been accepted or published elsewhere which most authors would not want to commit. Duplicate submission to several journals before acceptance by any single journal is also a clear misdemeanour, even if the author(s) claim that they were unaware of this ‘regulation’.

2. Submission of a case report which has already been published either fully or partially on a website is often encouraged by a professional society when case reports have been accepted for their meetings. This is a particular problem for case reports and images because by their nature the reports are often brief and contain minimal or no additional information than is found in possibly slightly shorter versions published on meeting/society websites. In many cases, the authors have been reassured by professional societies or third parties that the internet publication is not a formal publication and that the report could be submitted to a medical journal. Such duplicate submissions should generally be classified as mistakes and not misdemeanours.

3. Submission of an article that has already been published in a ‘magazine’ rather than a ‘journal’ of a professional society. The report in the magazine is often identical to the case report submitted for publication in a conventional medical journal but has not been issued a DOI. Generally, the authors are not aware that the magazine publication counts as a full publication of the report or image, and have been told just the opposite, in which case the duplicate submission is a mistake and not a misdemeanour. Even if classified as a mistake, it would still be considered inappropriate to publish such a case.

4. Submission of a report by a group of authors that has already been submitted/published. When one or several authors are present on both articles, in which case the second submission is a serious misdemeanour. This could be avoided by the simple practice of recording in the patient’s medical chart that a case report has been submitted/published. When the articles present predominantly different aspects of the case both submissions may be acceptable provided that there is no more than necessary overlap and that clear reference is made to the original case is made in both the cover letter and the manuscript itself. Submission of a report on further developments in a patient whose case has already been published is also acceptable provided that the original report is cited and only briefly re-reported in the follow-up submission.

5. It is becoming all too common that case reports are solicited by start-up and potentially predatory open access journals. After often...
and in to different categories of 'duplicate publication' are set out below.

However, in most instances, a journal receiving a submission that has been previously published in whole or in large part must re-publish the case. Authors should think carefully about where to submit their articles.1

According to Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) journals should:

- ‘publish the contact details of their editor-in-chief who should act as the point of contact for questions relating to research and publication integrity;
- inform institutions if they suspect misconduct by their researchers and provide evidence to support these concerns;
- cooperate with investigations and respond to institutions’ questions about misconduct allegations;
- be prepared to issue retractions or corrections (according to the COPE guidelines on retractions) when provided with findings of misconduct arising from investigations;
- have policies for responding to institutions and other organizations that investigate cases of research misconduct2.

**European Heart Journal—Case Reports** support the responses outlined by COPE. However, we have distinguished between five different forms of attempted duplicate publication and classified them as ‘serious misdemeanour’, ‘misdemeanour’, ‘mistake’, ‘unintentional’, and ‘acceptable’ (see above) depending on the degree of malign intention and collusion on the part of the author. However, in most instances, a journal receiving a submission that has been previously published in whole or in large part must reject the article for publication. The details of the EHJ-CR response to different categories of ‘duplicate publication’ are set out below and in Table 1.

The grade of seriousness of the intended re-publication is often unknown to the editors and reviewers of the second journal. When discovered, the journal will seek additional information by writing to the corresponding author of the paper in question setting out the concern regarding the attempted or actual duplicate publication and seeking an explanation for this.

Serious misdemeanours in which there is a flagrant intention to publish the same (or largely similar) article for a second time should be reported to the author’s institution. Committee on Publication Ethics specifically suggests that authors should NOT be banned due to potential legal ramifications.3 However, case reports are often submitted by authors without strong institutional oversight. As such, in situations of repeat offences, the journal may have to undertake a summary assessment of any further submissions by such author(s).

Mistakes should be dealt with by educating authors of the publication trap into which they have fallen. When assured by their societies, supervisors, or superiors that the practice was legitimate, they should be encouraged to feedback to those involved and copy their feedback and any responses received to the journal editor.

Inappropriate dual publication because of the action of ‘predatory’ journals should prompt the author to complain to that journal and copy that complaint and any responses to the editor of the journal to which the duplicate was submitted.

As noted above, there are circumstances when some details of a published case report can be legitimately re-published. For example, when a progress or follow-up report is submitted or occasionally where two quite different aspects of the same case are being independently reported. In both instances, the duplicate element of the publication should be short and included only to provide the appropriate context for the second report. To avoid plagiarism, the information in the second report should not be a simple ‘cut and paste’ from the original report.

Intentional duplicate publication is serious misconduct. Because the first paper may not have already been published or published in a journal that is not adequately indexed it may be impossible for reviewers and editors to discover before the second publication appears in their journal. It is strongly advised that the editorial process for a journal includes a check for plagiarism using suitable software to identify, where possible, the potential for duplicate publication. However, it may not be until after the publication has appeared that the duplication is discovered. In this case, the editor should first check the submission, acceptance, and publication dates of both papers. European Heart Journal—Case Reports will generally aim to undertake additional checks on the publications of each author to uncover other possible examples of duplicate publication. When full information is available, the author(s) should be informed and dealt with as outlined above. In addition, the editors-in-chief of the other journal(s) involved in the duplication should be informed. Correction or retraction of at least one or occasionally both papers is necessary at this stage.

Cooperation between publishers, professional societies, research institutions, universities, university hospitals, and others is essential to combat the rising incidence of duplicate publication and lesser degrees of plagiarism. There is frequently a large element of dishonesty amongst authors who participate in this fraudulent activity which

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**Table 1** Summary of the response of EHJ-CR to duplicate publication

| Category           | Rejection/retraction | Report to the author's host institution |
|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Serious misdemeanour | Yes                  | Yes                                    |
| Misdemeanour       | Yes                  | Yes                                    |
| Mistake            | Yes                  | No                                     |
| Unintentional      | Yes                  | No                                     |
| Acceptable         | No                   | No                                     |
Conflict of interest: None declared.

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1. Think, Check, Submit. https://thinkchecksubmit.org/ (1 January 2022).
2. Redundant (duplicate) publication in a published article. Committee on Publication Ethics. https://publicationethics.org/resources/flowcharts/redundant-duplicate-publication-published-article (1 January 2022).

should be identified by editors, managed by publishers, prohibited by professional societies, research and reporting institutions, and when appropriate the responsible authors should be reprimanded by all concerned. However, as we have outlined, the duplicate publication represents a spectrum and appropriate management often requires a more nuanced approach.