

## Similarities v plagiarism: is there a margin for debate?

When compiling relevant data for publication, certain common terms and phrases will inevitably be apparent. Many such texts will be researched by different authors and organisations for publication within their publications and websites. Common references and occasionally whole phrases may be embedded in the copy and constitute stylistic language appropriate to the sector under discussion. As a result certain sentences are likely to resemble those written by others of the same subject matter. Is this plagiarism?

It is often from academic studies that certain words in common uses evolve within a sector. By way of example, to transform a sentence that made reference to the strict code of confidentiality, consent and ethics in scientific research would be almost impossible without mentioning the terms 'confidential', 'ethical approval' and 'informed consent'. It would be inappropriate to claim plagiarism as there is very little alternative to express sentences like:

*"Written informed consent was obtained from the patient for publication of this case report/study/series and the accompanying images. A copy of the written consent is available for review by the Editor-in-Chief of the journal."*

*"Reviewers should continue to keep details of the manuscript and its review confidential."*

*"The protocol of this study has been approved by the relevant ethical committee related to our institution in which it was performed. All subjects gave full informed consent to participate in this study."*

*"No permission is required for non-commercial use or redistribution of any part of these guidelines"*

*"All authors contributed to the conception, design, and preparation of the manuscript, as well as read and approved the final manuscript."*

This is a stated fact in everyday use within the scientific research discipline and peer-reviewed publications. Indeed, it may be commonly used in written or spoken text without particular copyright restrictions. However, the question arises as to where to draw the line of balance?

The accepted code of practice in publication of any research paper or study is to substantiate phrases and terms whereby there is direct reference to a published work in a book, magazine or online. A comprehensive list of references used should be printed with corresponding links to any similar material. This would avoid any questions being raised regarding suspected plagiarism or copying.

### **What about incidental similarity?**

The author may not have intended to copy but various common references, which constitute familiar and recognised terms within the industry, may have been used from background research and reading matter. In this case the UK Copyright Service may be consulted and a certificate confirming copyright registration issued. The document may also be passed through software such as 'iThenticate' or 'Grammarly'. The author must take reasonable measures to prevent any accidental infringement on copyright belonging to any other party.

Consider two different authors using the same source material and producing similar works: it would be wise to reference any vulnerable areas to eliminate potential copying or duplicate material. Is it fair to penalise an author when the *concept* described within a journal or document is similar to another published piece? Surely a different way of expressing a standard rule cannot be disallowed by one party or another. The fact that the wording contained within the concept is completely different should overrule any plagiarism.

**In summary**, one can argue that common terms and phrases cannot have intellectual property copyright imposed upon it by one source or another. However it is expected to reference all words or phrases which could have been lifted directly from the published work of another author or organisation.