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US authorities crack down on plagiarism

Aggressive stance prompted by technology bringing more cases to light.**Eugenie Samuel Reich**

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When the director of a bioinformatics facility at Kansas University (KU) in Lawrence was informed about potential plagiarism in manuscripts he was co-authoring, university regulations say that he should have reported the problem immediately. He didn't, and on 3 January Gerald Lushington and his associate director, Mahesh Visvanathan, who was found directly responsible for the plagiarism, were both censured for misconduct by the US Office of Research Integrity (ORI). It's an unusual example of US authorities taking action against not only an individual found guilty of misconduct, but also a supervisor who has failed to deal with the problem.

Most of the ORI published findings have involved individual researchers being censured for data fabrication and falsification, not plagiarism. But John Dahlberg, head of the division of investigative oversight at the ORI, which is part of the US Department of Health and Human Services and located in Rockville, Maryland, says that more widespread use of plagiarism-detection software programs means that more major cases of plagiarism are surfacing, so the ORI is taking a tougher stance. "In recent months, we've had a plethora of plagiarism cases," he says.

Ironically, the KU case did not surface through use of a plagiarism-detection program. Rather, it came to light after the authors of a plagiarized paper complained. A university investigation subsequently found that a student had already informed Lushington and Visvanathan about the problem, but was ignored. KU declined to comment but has published two notices of public censure saying that Visvanathan committed plagiarism and that Lushington, his co-author, "was not forthcoming with the Investigating Committee regarding the timing of his knowledge of the plagiarism at issue". Neither of them reported the plagiarism to university authorities when they were told about it.



Gerry Lushington
KANSAS UNIVERSITY

The ORI notice says that Visvanathan committed intentional plagiarism, but he tells *Nature* that he is actually taking the blame for a student he was supervising at an institution abroad. "Even though the sanctions are severe, I have sincerely accepted them," he says. Lushington says that he has been advised not to comment. Two papers published by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers were retracted on 5 January^{1,2}.

The case follows two other recent plagiarism findings by the ORI. One, involving nursing researcher Scott Weber of the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, came to light after a journal editor received a complaint, and publishers Wiley conducted a search of his publications in three of their journals using iThenticate, a plagiarism-detection service by the

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Oakland, California-based company iParadigms. Elizabeth Poster, editor of the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, one of the Wiley journals that retracted papers by Weber³, says that she is considering whether to use iThenticate proactively, before sending papers out for review. “The minute you send it out to reviewers it’s an investment. You want to do due diligence and check it’s a valid and reliable product,” she says. But that rationale has to be balanced against the time cost.

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iThenticate also had a key role in another recent ORI case, that of physician and neurology researcher Jayant Jagannathan of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. David Hudson, the university’s associate vice-president for research, says that the university began subscribing to the service after he received a plagiarism complaint in 2008, and that he later used it to help establish the extent of Jagannathan’s plagiarism. The subscription costs the university a couple of thousand dollars per year and has so far been used to help substantiate two complaints and to suggest that another two or three were not warranted.

Chris Harrick, vice-president for marketing at iParadigm, says that iThenticate has become the standard for plagiarism-screening in scholarly publishing. The iThenticate database includes internet content gathered from a web crawler, to which can submit their own content in exchange for a subscription discount. Harrick says that around 50 research universities and 600 publishers — including Wiley, Elsevier and Nature Publishing Group — now subscribe. But Harrick urges caution when using the product to adjudicate particular cases. “We are not the judge or jury of plagiarism. It still needs a human eye to look at the results.”

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