Duplicate publication is not acceptable

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On behalf of the Editorial Board

Given the rapid rise in stature of the *Australian Journal of Physiotherapy* among international physiotherapy journals, it is timely to consider strategies associated with appropriate publication of research data.

Peer-reviewed publication is an essential element of the research process, allowing authors to add to the body of knowledge and influence practice. The National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia (NHMRC) considers publication of research findings to be a social responsibility of researchers.

Presenting research findings in an appropriate and ethical manner is important (Abraham 2000, Mojon-Azzi et al 2003, Jamrosik 2004). Terms like ‘salami publication,’ ‘fragmented publication,’ or ‘duplicate publication’ refer to multiple published papers that tell the same story from the same research project. Duplicate publication usually represents unethical and inappropriate publication practice yet can just as easily trap the unwary as the unscrupulous (Gwilym et al 2004). Authors of systematic reviews can usually cite at least one instance where the same content is published by the same (or different) authors in different journals (Smidt 2005, Grimes 2003, Tramer et al 1997). As a general rule, repeat publications are unnecessary, unprofessional, and consume precious journal space and reading time.

In academic environments where the ‘publish or perish’ philosophy is in place (Ward 1997), there are two main drivers of individual publication outputs. Part of the funding allocated to universities is based upon the number of peer-reviewed publications produced each year, and promotion (career and financial advancement) requires a consistently growing publication record.

Strategically then, it would seem efficient to extract more than one publication from the one dataset. So what is ethical and appropriate practice? This editorial outlines issues that authors should consider when preparing a manuscript for publication. The issues related to preparing multiple publications from the same research dataset are not as obvious as they seem, posing traps for new and experienced authors alike, and if not addressed can devalue good research and bring academic and clinical reputations into disrepute.

**Pre-publication requirements** Common requirements when submitting a paper to a peer-reviewed publication are outlined clearly in the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors 1997). It has become usual practice at time of submission that the principal author (at the very least) guarantees to the journal editor in writing that the paper has not been published in any similar form elsewhere, and that the paper is the result of original research.

Many journals now also require authors to state their role in the production of the paper. These may differ from the roles they held on the research project which produced the data.

This requirement states explicitly that individuals may not be authors solely on the basis of their support for or sponsorship of the study, their position (head of department or research centre), or their role in collecting data (Herbert and Allison 2001). The order with which authors are listed on a paper should be agreed among the authors prior to submission of any paper. Usually the principal author is the one who takes responsibility for the preparation of the paper. The order of subsequent authors may be decided in a number of ways: on the relative roles in the preparation of the paper, or by alphabetical or random order. When students prepare manuscripts, inclusion of their supervisors as authors should occur in line with the principles of authorship; simply being a supervisor is usually insufficient to warrant authorship.

Many journals also require authors to declare conflicts of interest. These conflicts can be complex, and may relate to financial, academic, or philosophical interests. A potential conflict of interest occurs when publication of a paper will produce side benefits for the author not related solely to the intellectual integrity of the work. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) provides useful guidance in addressing publication dilemmas such as conflict of interest dilemmas (see website list in references).

**Initial publication from a multiple dataset** Once published, the entire contents of a paper usually become the copyright (property) of the publishing journal. This means that the published paper cannot be reproduced in any way, in another journal or in a book, without the consent of the initial publishing journal. Moreover, information that has been published in the initial paper that may be integral to subsequent papers must be referenced to the original article. Thus the most appropriate strategy seems to be ‘When in doubt, declare!’ (Abrahams 2000, Mojon-Azzi et al 2003). When dealing with earlier publications of the same dataset it is best not to cite any part of the paper word-for-word in subsequent publications. Instead, cite relevant summary aspects of the original paper with appropriate citation and add new information where appropriate. Helpful statements may be ‘the methodology reported by Smith et al (2005) was used’. It is usually inappropriate to reproduce tables from the original publication. Instead, provide the appropriate reference with text such as ‘reported in Smith et al 2005’.

**Why publish more than once?** Many large research datasets present the opportunity for authors to publish more than once. Particularly if important new information can be extracted from the dataset for each subsequent publication, ongoing publication should be considered seriously. This often occurs when there are many outcome measures, or when different interventions or exposures have been tested. Studies may have collected qualitative and quantitative data which merit separate reporting. Researchers need to reflect on their publication opportunities to ensure that their publications are framed appropriately, ethically and intellectually.
If authors believe that their dataset offers opportunities for multiple publications then they should plan the aims, methodology, results, and implications of all proposed papers prior to submission of the first paper. The preferred target audience for each paper should be identified, as well as possible journals for publication. This process should flag unintended instances where duplicate publication could occur. When in doubt regarding citation of earlier published work (including work in press), declare your concerns to the editor. When communicating with editors indicate clearly how subsequent publications add new information to the body of knowledge.

To assist authors, some journals request copies of all previously published papers, and all papers in press, that use the same dataset as the submitted paper. Even if this is not required, a review by the authors of what has already been published and submitted for publication could ensure that duplicate publication does not inadvertently occur.

**Conflicting expectations of reviewers** There appear to be two schools of thought regarding the amount of information required in subsequent papers (particularly methods and key results) (Abrahams 2000, DeMaria 2003, Jamrosik 2004). One holds that authors should be required simply to cite relevant earlier publications, and not repeat any of the information in these publications, on the expectation that journal readers will access the publications for full information on the study. Another holds that authors should provide sufficient detail on their study to allow any one paper to stand alone. This does not justify word-for-word duplication of descriptions of methods. Where authors find themselves with reviewers of the second school, they are wise to seek advice from the reviewer and scientific editor regarding ways to manage potential conflict between previous publication of this information, and the need for a paper to stand alone.

**Is the content of a paper published in one specialty journal likely to be of interest to other readers?** The findings of most research projects are relevant to more than just one audience, so the decision regarding where to publish the first paper from a research project becomes paramount. Papers which have wide audience appeal should be published in widely-read journals. Papers which have narrow or profession-specific appeal should be published in journals which will reach the target audience.

Authors should thus consider, early in the publication process, what aspects of their work would be of interest to wide and specialty audiences. Sending the same message to different audiences is an area where duplicate publication can occur, albeit in good faith (Abrahams 2000, DeMaria 2003, Mojon-Azzi et al 2003). One solution, instead of submitting a duplicate publication to a new audience, is to consider sending a detailed letter to the editor of the second journal, highlighting the relevance of the previously published work for a new group of readers. Not only would this increase readership of the initial paper, but it would also attract a citation of the initial paper.

**Who owns the dataset and who has access to it for analysis and publication?** Ethical approval from most institutions requires researchers to identify the owner(s) of the data, which researchers have access to the data, and under what constraints the data can be accessed. However, where there are multiple researchers in a team, issues of ownership of and access to the research dataset can become complex, particularly if all researchers claim equal rights to the data and do not work physically in the same place (for ready exchange of information about publication issues).

Ownership of research data is of particular concern where student data are used. Whilst the student is enrolled in a program of study and in regular contact with his or her supervisors, both parties are usually involved in preparation of a manuscript. In many institutions it is expected that the student (or at least senior students) will be the principal author if they fulfil the requirements for first authorship (Herbert and Allison 2001). However, delays in reviewing processes mean that revisions to submitted manuscripts are commonly undertaken by supervisors after students have left the institution. This can produce often unintended opportunities for unethical or unauthorised interpretation and reporting of research data. Where students have not published, or do not intend to publish, the ownership and use of the student data for future publication becomes a contentious issue, particularly if subsequent publication is undertaken by others without the original student’s knowledge. When in doubt, supervisors and other students should seek written consent from the student and involve the student, as appropriate, in the publication, either as an author or in an acknowledgement.

**References**


**Websites**


www.publicationethics.org.uk