

Plagiarism in Graduate Medical Education

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The act of overt plagiarism by graduates of accredited residency programs represents a failure in personal integrity. It also indicates a lack of professionalism, one of the six Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) competencies for graduate medical education. A recent experience at one geriatric fellowship indicates that the problem of plagiarism may be more prevalent than previously recognized. A situation was discovered at the geriatric medicine fellowship at Florida Hospital Family Medicine Residency Program in Orlando, Fla, in which three of the personal statements included in a total of 26 applications to the fellowship in the past 2 years contained portions plagiarized from a single Web site. The aim in documenting this plagiarism is to raise awareness among medical educators about the availability of online sources of content and ease of electronic plagiarism. Some students and residents may not recognize copying other resources verbatim as plagiarism. Residency programs should evaluate their own need for education about plagiarism and include this in the training of the competency of professionalism.

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As required by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), all geriatric medicine fellowship programs are 1–2 year postgraduate positions (postgraduate year [PGY]-4, PGY-5) based at existing accredited family medicine or internal medicine residency programs. Currently, there are 139 accredited geriatric medicine programs in the United States.

Applications for PGY-4 geriatric medicine fellowship programs typically include a written personal statement. The personal statement is typically no more than 500 words long. It explains the applicant's personal motivation for pursuing a geriatric fellowship and plans for future practice.

Personal statements for geriatric fellowships often comment on the increasing population of elderly patients and the unique and challenging medical needs of frail elders. It is not uncommon to describe a unique or meaningful patient encounter with a geriatric patient as part of the motivation for desiring further geriatric medicine training.

The Plagiarism Experience

In the fall of 2005, while reviewing applications to the geriatric fellowship program at Florida Hospital, the program director noticed a striking similarity between two of the personal statements. The applications came from residents at different residency programs in different parts of the country. The personal statements differed in opening and concluding paragraphs, but each contained the following description nearly verbatim:

I met a tiny, elderly lady with mild dementia who had been admitted to my care because she was suffering from a urinary tract infection. Starting her on a routine antibiotic, I noticed that while her physical condition improved, her spirit remained listless and depressed. The woman accepted her treatment reluctantly, even crying or screaming at the nursing staff. The other physicians attributed her behavior to the dementia, but I wondered whether there might be something more complex going on in her pathology. Surmising that her outbursts might be the result of loneliness rather than confusion—I decided to see whether some personal attention could help improve her condition. I spent a little time at the end of each shift talking to the woman. After earning her trust, she confided in me her story. She said that she lived alone and had

recently lost her husband and son. She felt lonely and had no friends. Realizing that her asocial behavior was the result of deep-seated pain, I gave the best medicine I could offer: my friendship.

One day several months later, I had a wonderful surprise during my rotation in ambulatory medicine. Working at the local senior center, I was approached by a tiny but happy-looking woman. She asked whether I remembered her, and I immediately recognized her voice. It was my patient. I was surprised by how much she had changed. As her eyes sparkled with life and interest, she said something to me I will never forget: "Thank you, doctor, for what you have done for me."¹

A Google search for "Geriatric Personal Statement" provided a listing of 774,000 Web sites. The first Web site listed was www.essayedge.com, an editing service that offers to improve various types of essays for a fee. One of the examples provided is a geriatric personal statement, complete with before and after versions for a potential customer to review. The polished geriatric personal statement on the Web site contained the extended story repeated above. All personal statements were then checked for possible plagiarism against Internet sources. Upon review of the applications received the previous year, a third application was found containing a personal statement partly plagiarized from the same Web site.

In the experience of the faculty at Florida Hospital Family Medicine Residency Program, the problem of plagiarism is not limited to personal statements. Several residents have plagiarized portions of or entire oral presentations by failing to cite the source. When confronted, many expressed dismay and claimed that they did not intend to represent the content as their own and did not know that it was necessary to cite another's work.

Why Learners Plagiarize

The first reason why learners plagiarize is obvious—access. The current students or residents are far more adept at utilizing computers to find information than many of their instructors. The Internet allows for a virtually limitless supply of information accessible in seconds. Years ago, to plagiarize required a word-for-word retyping of a document or text on a typewriter. The typists certainly knew they were plagiarizing. The seconds it takes to cut a paragraph or two from an Internet Web site and paste it into your electronic document may reduce the awareness of stealing that content.

Another reason may be that applicants, particularly those for whom English is not a primary language, may be uncomfortable with their writing ability. Medical documentation rarely requires writing with complete sentences or correct grammar. Residents, regardless of primary language, likely feel out of practice with writing prose when composing their personal statements, thus making plagiarism more attractive.

A third reason is even more problematic. There may be a generational gap in the perception of plagiarism. The learners may not perceive plagiarism as a significant wrong. One example of plagiarism in the form of one medical student writing a paper for another student was published by Emilie Osborne, MD, MPH, in 2000. In it, Dr Osborne points out that the student and faculty response to the admitted cheating varied greatly, with faculty supporting dismissal and students expressing that because the paper was in a "trivial course" and not for publication, the act was balanced by the good of "helping your buddy."²

A survey of medical students in 1980 found that 58% reported cheating.^{3,4} Rennie and Crosby surveyed medical students and found that 56% reported that they

had engaged in or would consider engaging in copying directly from published text and only listing it as a reference.⁴ The authors noted that this response "may indicate students' lack of understanding regarding referencing text appropriately and also a need for clear guidelines."⁴

Even more controversial is the idea of a difference in cultural perceptions of plagiarism. While a discussion of the moral codes forbidding stealing of the written word in various world cultures is beyond the scope of this document, perception of what constitutes public versus private property does vary from one culture to another. Learners from varying cultural backgrounds greatly enrich the medical school and residency landscape, but some need instruction in proper citation and the expectations of their current national residence regarding plagiarism.

Additionally, international medical graduates training in the United States with J-1 or H-1B visas may be allowed to remain in the United States longer by pursuing education beyond the completion of a traditional residency and continuing on to a fellowship program. It is difficult to judge the degree of effect this may have on motivation to pursue further graduate medical education, but combined with a lack of comfort with written English prose, it may contribute to plagiarism in personal statements.

Failure of Professionalism Training

Whatever the reason, it is often said, "To tolerate is to teach." Certainly most educators, whether in the medical school or graduate medical education setting, would agree that plagiarism, when recognized, should be confronted. Beyond this, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) has charged residencies with the task of teaching and evaluating professionalism in our students. It is

usually addressed with discussions of ethical principles in the context of challenging cases such as end-of-life or reproductive medicine.⁵ However, as Huddle explores in his article on teaching professionalism, professionalism in training means “acting rightly when the right path is clear before us but other pressing needs and desires pull us away from that path in the midst of the day-to-day medical routine, under often burdensome stresses.”⁵ We can easily see how students, in the midst of fatigue and under pressure from multiple sources, may find it easy to plagiarize a presentation or personal statement found on the Internet.

What Is the Appropriate Response to Plagiarism?

Returning to the example of the plagiarized personal statements, the program director discussed the case with multiple colleagues. The general consensus was to notify the offending residents and their respective residency directors. This was done via written letter. A letter was sent to each resident stating that they would not be invited to interview because of the plagiarism act. A letter was concurrently sent to the program directors of the residencies each resident was currently attending, including a copy of the personal statement and a citation of the Web site (www.essayedge.com).

The program director arranged through the Association of Directors of Geriatric Academic Programs (ADGAP) for an e-mail to be sent out to each member of ADGAP stating that applications containing plagiarized personal statements

had been received and referring the program directors to the Web site for review. The names of the applicants were not included in the e-mail. This prompted a discussion regarding the proper response with other program directors who also received applications containing plagiarized personal statements.

The Florida Board of Medicine was contacted, reporting the plagiarism act and requesting guidance regarding any further obligations to report. A representative of the Florida Board of Medicine responded, stating that no obligation to report exists.

Are Personal Statements Useful?

Program directors and other faculty reviewing an application use personal statements for various purposes. Many use them as a guide to the applicant’s proficiency in English and motivation for pursuing the residency or fellowship position. The possibility that a personal statement was not written by the applicant calls into question the usefulness of this practice.

It is common practice to ask a colleague to review an important writing sample, whether a personal statement for application to a fellowship or an article for submission to a journal. So long as the writing is done by the author, and reviewers, whether paid or unpaid, make only minor revisions, most would argue that plagiarism has not occurred. However, when the writing is so heavily edited as to no longer represent the abilities and ideas of the author, plagiarism has occurred. Where the line falls between the two is debated. For a

more complete discussion on the subject, I refer the reader to Bok’s *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*.⁶

Resources for Medical Educators

While little is written on plagiarism among medical students and residents, much more information on the subject has been published by our undergraduate professor colleagues. Multiple online services exist (at some cost) to search for plagiarism in documents. Among them are www.turnitin.com and www.iThenticate.com. However, as in the experience of the example cited above, plagiarism may be found by use of a common and free Internet search engine such as www.google.com.

A variety of information defining plagiarism and correct citing of reference sources is available at www.plagiarism.org and www.web-miner.com/plagiarism.

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