

The Ethics of Outsourcing: Contract Cheating in Medicine and Health Sciences

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Invited Presentation for Orthopaedic Surgery City-Wide Rounds,

hosted by Foothills Hospital, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

February 15, 2019 - 07:00 – 08:00

Abstract

The use of essay mills and other online sites to buy academic work is a global industry estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The practice is known as “contract cheating” (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006), and it occurs when a student engages with a third party to complete academic work on their behalf. Canada lags behind other nations in terms of research and awareness about what contract cheating is, how extensive the industry is and the implications for students, institutions and society, but we are beginning to make advances in scholarship, awareness and advocacy. In this presentation, I synthesize available evidence about contract cheating, highlighting what is known about this form of misconduct in medicine and health sciences.

Keywords: cheating, academic integrity, academic misconduct, academic dishonesty, contract cheating, essay mills, medical education, health, medicine, Canada

Additional material: 6 figures, 1 table, 23 references.

Introduction

I would like to begin by sharing two quotations that offer a backdrop for the entire presentation. The first is from Stephen Parnis, Vice-President of the Australian Medical Association, who said that “Ethical behaviour doesn't begin and end with patient care....It is also essential in the work of students and teachers. Without confidence in the doctor in front of you,

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medical care is very difficult to deliver.” (Source: Bagshaw, 2016). The notion that ethics and integrity are essential elements of medical student training is key.

The second quotation that frames this presentation is from Tonkin (2015), who noted that “Among medical students, self-reported cheating rates have been found to be 25-35% and self-reported plagiarism rates up to 90%” (p. 22). Note that these are for self-reported data, which tend to be lower than actual incidences. So if we agree that the first quotation is accurate and that ethics and integrity are essential elements of training for medical and health students, then we must wonder why at least a quarter of medical students admit to cheating and up to 90% admit to plagiarizing? We likely will not be able to answer this question today, but I ask you to keep the question at the forefront of your mind during this presentation.

Objectives

By the end of this session participants will be able to:

- Define and explain what contract cheating is
- Explain how the global contract cheating industry works
- Understand the impact of contract cheating among medical and health program students

Definition of Contract Cheating

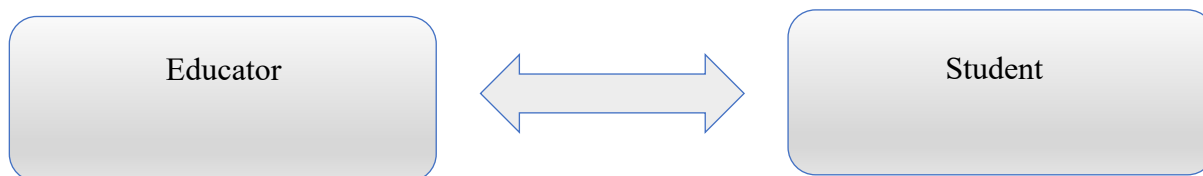
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2017) explained that “contract cheating happens when a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own, where such input is not permitted” (p. 1). The term “contract cheating” was coined by Clarke and Lancaster (2006). Examples include essay mills, thesis consultation services, professional exam takers (impersonators), and custom writing services. Of particular interest to medical schools that require essays as part of a student’s application for admission, is that the practice of online companies buying and selling student admission essays has been documented for over 20 years (McCollum, 1997).

There are a number of models that outline how contract cheating works, with some of the most comprehensive being offered by Lancaster (2017). My figure shows a simplified version of the transactional nature of contract cheating in its simplest form. A foundation of learning is that the educator expects to work directly with the student in the learning process. That expectation is

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violated when a third party is introduced into the equation, often without the permission or knowledge of the educator.

Expectation:



Violation:

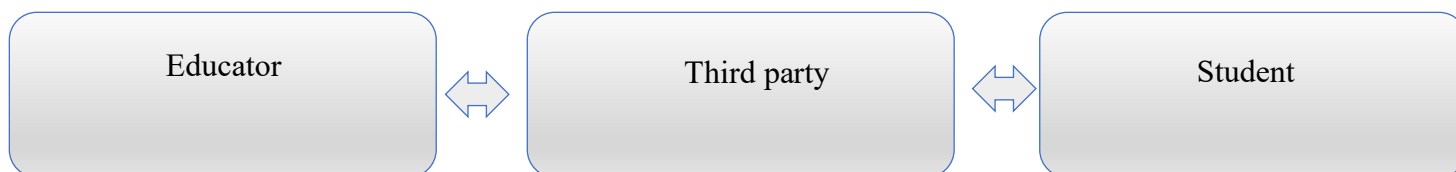


Figure 1. Simple model of how contract cheating violates the expectations that educators work directly with students in the learning process.

There are various types of “third parties” who can engage with students, divided into two main categories: Those motivated by money and those motivated by love or loyalty. The majority of my talk will focus on the former, and even more specifically on commercial providers of contract cheating services. I will offer an overview of how the industry works, then talk about prevalence, legalities and ethical complexities for students. I share examples from medicine and health sciences in the form of screen shots from actual websites offering services to students. I offer these with the following caveat: Many of these businesses claim the products and services they offer are perfectly legal, and what they sell are examples students can use as models from which to learn. To that end, I have anonymized the company information from the

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screen shots I have included, to avoid any legal backlash from these companies. As such, no corporate names or URLs for particular websites are discussed.

Having said that, I would add that if you are curious as to how this industry works, it would take you only a few minutes of your own time to do a quick internet search using terms such as “write my medical essay”, which is similar to the search terms I used to gather the screen shots for this presentation. Another tip I have for you is to do a search for the particular courses you teach, as sometimes you may find essays or assignments done for a specific course available for sale.

Overview of the Contract Cheating Industry

The majority of commercial contract cheating providers today operate through online storefronts. Experts have determined that there are a limited number of parent companies that own many websites. Parent companies keep changing the websites (storefronts) to make them harder to detect (Plagiarism.org, 2017).

In a recent study I conducted with my colleague, Roswita Dressler, we found that 89% of web sites offered students a real-time chat option (Eaton & Dressler, in press). This means that students can get live customer service, 24/7, and can chat with a person ready and willing to walk them through the entire process of how to buy their academic work online. Universities and colleges, by and large, do not provide such customer service to students, with many on-campus services being offered only during regular business hours. So when students are anxiously trying to figure out how to complete their assignments at night or on the weekends, the contract cheating companies are there for them.

Students upload their assignment instructions to the online site and the work is then assigned to an individual who completes the work on the student’s behalf. Some companies use an auction model in which ghostwriters compete for projects. (Newton & Lang, 2016). The turnaround time for assignments ranges from 0 – 24 days, with the average being 5 days (Newton & Lang, 2016). About a quarter of all orders are filled within one day or less (Newton & Lang, 2016).

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Cost and Turnaround Time

The cost of contract cheating services is typically determined by a number of factors including:

1. Topic – The more specialized, the more expensive.
2. Deadline – The faster the student needs it, the more they pay.
3. Level of work – PhD level writing costs more than undergraduate-level writing.

Prevalence

It is difficult to know for sure how big the contract cheating industry is due to lack of data. More and more researchers are studying this now, so every year the evidence we have is more accurate and more reliable. Here's what we know today: In 2013, Turnitin reported that up to 20% of 38.3 million papers included text-matches to paper mills and cheat sites (Turnitin, 2013). A large scale study showed that about 3.5% of students, on average, self-report to have engaged in contract cheating, but there is variance among samples (up to 7.9%) (Curtis & Claire, 2017).

We know that among those who buy academic work online, if they do it once, they are likely to do it again. Over 62% of those who engaged in contract cheating did so more than once (Curtis & Clare, 2017). Lancaster and Clarke (2008) reported that more than 50% had placed multiple orders. In other words, “a small number of offenders are responsible for a very large amount of the crime” (Curtis & Clare, 2017, p. 117).

There is some discussion about which academic disciplines are most susceptible to contract cheating, but an overall consensus of the top five field are (Curtis & Clare, 2017; Bretag, 2017):

- Business
- Engineering
- Sciences (including pre-med)
- Humanities
- Education

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However, Lancaster, one of the world's leading scholars on the subject noted: "Contract cheating in health is amongst the most popular subjects that students cheat on." (Lancaster, 2015, p. 2). Less is known about the prevalence of contract cheating in the medical and health sciences, but academic integrity researchers are beginning to pay more attention, as the evidence becomes more difficult to ignore.

Here are some examples of screen shots I collected in a short period of time, showing academic work for sale online specifically for students enrolled in medical and health programs. The first one shows the results of a Google search for the words "write my medical essay", which resulted in 153,000,000 results. Of course, we know that Google results can vary from region to region and person to person, so if you perform the same search, your results may be different. I would also add the caveat that not all of these results are for contract cheating companies. Nevertheless, even if only 1% of these sites sell academic work to medical students, that would be over 1.5 million sites that facilitate academic dishonesty and misconduct among those who aspire to a career in medicine. The ethics of that cannot be lost on us.

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The screenshot shows a Google search for "write my medical essay" on the Google.ca website. The search results page displays approximately 153,000,000 results in 0.65 seconds. The top result is an advertisement for IdealEditing.Net, offering a 50% discount on medical essay writing services. Below the ad is a featured snippet titled "How to write a medical essay?" which includes a list of eight tips for writing a personal statement for medical school. The tips are: 1. Write, re-write, let it sit, and write again! ... 2. Stay focused. ... 3. Back off the cliches. ... 4. Find your unique angle. ... 5. Be interesting. ... 6. Show don't tell. ... 7. Embrace the 5-point essay format. ... 8. Good writing is simple writing. Below the list is a link to "15 Tips for Your Medical School Personal Statement | The Princeton Review" and a search bar with the query "How to write a medical essay?". Below the featured snippet is a "People also ask" section with four related questions: "How do you write a compelling personal statement?", "How many words is 5300 characters?", "How long should my personal statement be medical school?", and "How long should my personal statement be?". Below the "People also ask" section are two more search results: "Medical essay writing - Write My Essay Today" and "Medical Essay Writing - Essay Medical Application Structure, Review ...".

Figure 2. Google search of “Write my medical essay” yielded 153,000,000 results

Search date: February 4, 2019

Disclaimer: Not all of these results will be for contract cheating sites.





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Below is a screen shot from a service that declares “papers written by our team constantly receive only top grades”. You can see this text at the bottom of the screen shot. The implication is that students can buy work from the site with assurances they will receive “top grades”. Such promises are not uncommon on these websites.

Why Is Medical Essay Writing So Difficult?

The medical field is quite complex and there is a lot of information that needs to be learned. After all, you are responsible for the lives of your patients. There is no room for mistakes in the medical field, and this fact should reflect in your medical application essay. Your papers should be flawless. Furthermore, your work must be interesting and bring value to the topic you are discussing. Creating an essay for medical school is, as such, definitely not an easy task. However, you're not alone! WriteMyEssay.today and its team of experienced ENL authors and expert editors are here to offer you the assistance you need.

BENEFITS

 24/7 CUSTOMER SUPPORT Answering your calls and emails round-the-clock.	 US & UK WRITERS We hire professional academic writers from US and UK only.	 100% CONFIDENTIAL Your private and billing information is totally secure.	 BULK DISCOUNTS Get a discount for your first or multiple orders.
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Need Medical School Essay Help?

Don't worry, you are definitely not the only student who needs our [medical essay writing service](#). When it comes to academic essays, most students require help at one point or another. Over the years, we have gradually increased the quality of our services to the point where papers written by our team constantly receive only top grades. Our agency is committed to submitting the work on time to each one of its customers. In addition, you can rest assured that we can

Figure 3. Screen capture date: February 4, 2018 (Company information intentionally anonymized.)

Shown below is another screen shot from a company that appeals to students' emotions by saying they no longer have to be afraid of writing essays.

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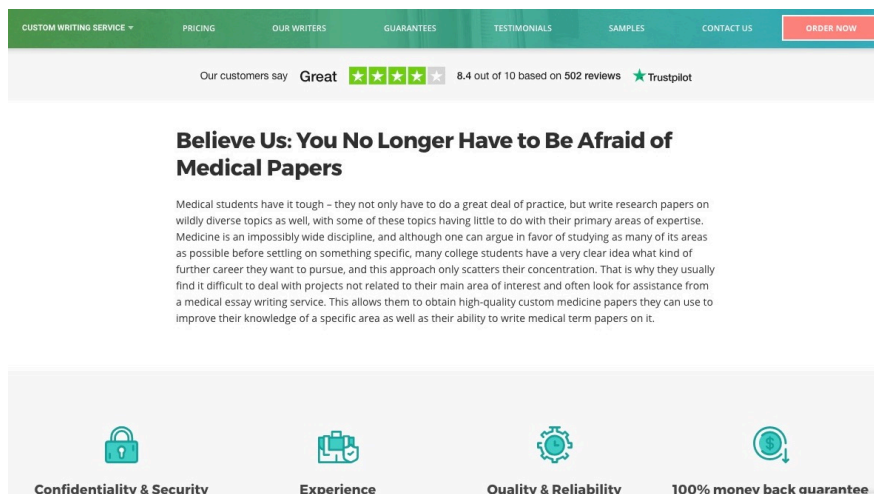


Figure 4. Screen capture date: February 5, 2018 (Company information intentionally anonymized.)

Emerging Evidence of a Possible Business Model

Online services that provide custom-written work advertise that the papers they provide are “plagiarism-free”, implying that if the work is run through a text-matching (also commonly known as plagiarism detection) software that the result will come back as “plagiarism-free”. But such promises cannot be guaranteed, as buyers have no evidence of where the product they have paid for originated.

Evidence remains anecdotal, but is nevertheless worth discussing. Earlier I mentioned how there are a number of parent companies that own multiple store fronts. Evidence is beginning to emerge that not all of their storefronts offer products for sale, but also have websites specifically designed to acquire content that they will later sell on a different website. Those of us who work as researchers and advocates in the field of academic integrity have heard of instances in which a student (Student A) who struggles with writing or lacks confidence uploads their work to a free site offering writing help. Student A thinks this is an excellent service that can help them improve their writing and they are grateful for the free service. What they do not know is that their work may be harvested by that website and later sold, without their knowledge or permission, through a contract cheating storefront, only to be bought by another student taking the same or similar course (Student B).

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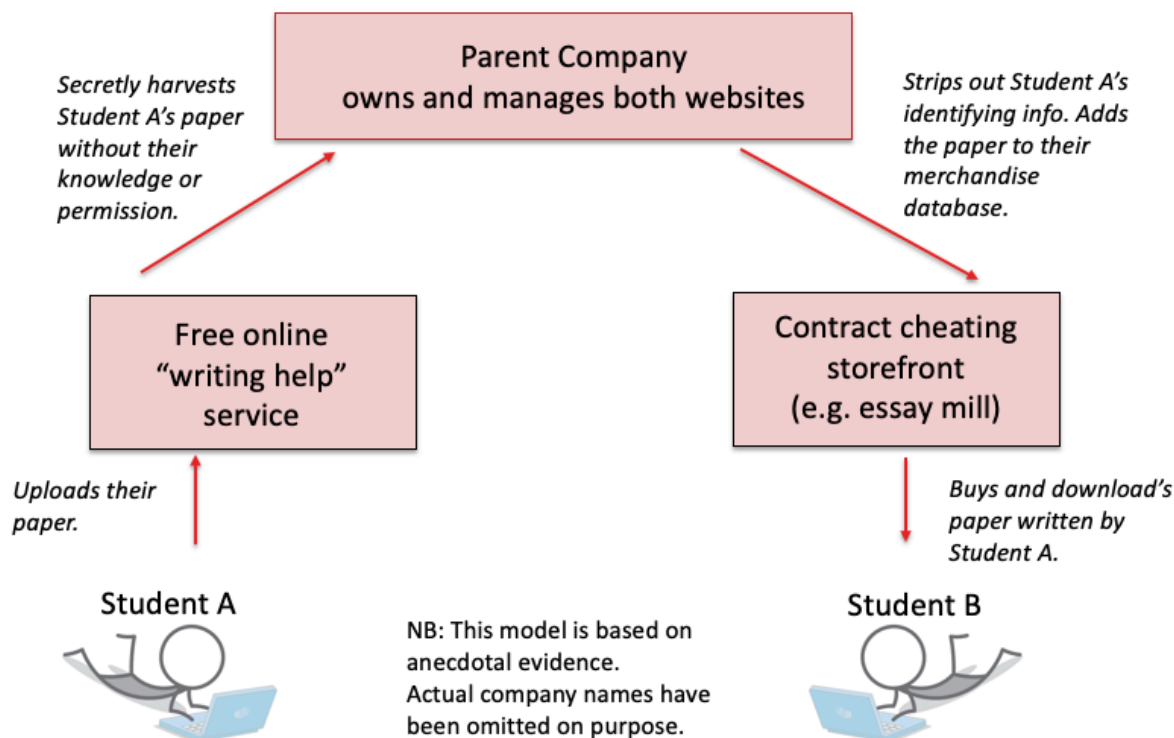


Figure 5. Possible model of how parent companies harvest work from some students and sell it to other students without the knowledge or permission of the student who actually did the work.

The way academic integrity advocates have found out about this possible business model is through reports that when a professor used text-matching software (also called plagiarism detection software) on student submissions, both papers were identified as being identical. The result was that Student A had no idea their paper had been harvested by the company until Student B confessed to having bought it through an online service. Only then were various individuals involved able to piece together what happened.

As a result of hearing stories like this, I now actively discourage students from uploading any of their academic work to online help sites, but instead to seek help from the campus writing centre. I encourage you to do the same.

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Legal Aspects of Contract Cheating

Anecdotes such as this may cause you to wonder if contract cheating is illegal. While it is certainly immoral and may violate institutional academic integrity policy, actual legislation is sparse (Newton & Lang, 2016). Contract cheating is currently illegal in New Zealand, as well as in 17 U.S. states. The Florida State University College of Law offers a terrific resource to help the public understand statutes and legislation around term paper mills and other sites offering academic work for sale online.

The screenshot displays the Florida State University College of Law Research Center website. The header includes the text "FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LAW RESEARCH CENTER" and a slogan "We're here to help!". Below the header, there is a navigation menu with options like "Research Center", "Research Guides", "Term Paper Mills", and "Statutes and Legislative Information". The main content area is titled "Term Paper Mills: Statutes and Legislative Information" and features a search bar. The page is divided into three columns, each showing legal statutes from different states:

- California: Education Code**
 - 66400.** No person shall prepare, offer to prepare, cause to be prepared, sell, or otherwise distribute any term paper, thesis, dissertation, or other written material for another person, for a fee or other compensation, with the knowledge, or under circumstances in which he should reasonably have known, that such term paper, thesis, dissertation, or other written material is to be submitted by any other person for academic credit at any public or private college, university, or other institution of higher learning in this state. (Enacted by Stats. 1976, Ch. 1010.)
 - 66401.** No person shall make or disseminate, with the intent to induce any other person to enter into any obligation relating thereto, any statement, written or oral, that he will prepare, cause to be prepared, sell, or otherwise distribute any term paper, thesis, dissertation, or other written material, for a fee or other compensation, for or on behalf of any person who has been assigned the written preparation of such term paper, thesis, dissertation, or other written material for academic credit at any public or private college, university, or other institution of higher learning in this state. (Enacted by Stats. 1976, Ch. 1010.)
 - 66402.** Any court of competent jurisdiction is hereby authorized to grant such relief as is necessary to enforce the provisions of this chapter, including the issuance of an injunction. (Enacted by Stats. 1976, Ch. 1010.)
 - 66403.** Actions for injunction under the provisions of this chapter may be brought in the name of the people of the State of California upon their own complaint or upon the complaint of any person, or in the name of any public or private college, university, or other institution of higher learning, acting for the interest of itself, its students, or the general public. (Enacted by Stats. 1976, Ch. 1010.)
- Massachusetts General Laws**
 - Sec. 50. Sale of Research Papers, etc.; taking of examinations for another at educational institutions.** Section 50. Whoever, alone or in concert with others, sells to another, or arranges for or assists in such sale for another, a theme, term paper, thesis or other paper or the written results of research, knowing or having reason to know that such theme, term paper, thesis or other paper or research results or substantial material therefrom will be submitted or used by some other person for academic credit and represented as the original work of such person at an educational institution in the commonwealth or elsewhere without proper attribution as to source, or whoever takes an examination for another at any educational institution in the commonwealth, shall be punished by a fine of not more than one hundred dollars or by imprisonment for not more than six months, or both. (Added by St. 1973, c. 874)
- Nevada Revised Statutes**
 - 207.320 Preparation or sale of academic writings.** Any person who prepares for sale or sells any term paper, thesis, dissertation or similar writing intending such writing to be submitted to an academic institution as the work of any person not the author in fulfillment of a requirement for completion of a course of study, award of a degree or other academic credit is guilty of a misdemeanor. (Added to NRS by 1973, 1161)
- New Jersey Statutes**
 - 18A:2-3. Preparation, offering for sale of certain documents; penalty**
 - 2. a. No person shall, for any fee, or other remuneration, prepare, offer to prepare, cause to be prepared, sell or offer for sale any term paper, thesis, dissertation, or any other written material intended for submission to an educational institution for credit or for a degree, diploma, certificate or course of study.
- Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes**
 - 7324. Unlawful sale of dissertations, theses and term papers.**
 - (a) Definitions.--As used in this section:
 - (1) "Assignment" means any specific written, recorded, pictorial, artistic, or other academic task that is intended for submission to any university, academy, school or other educational institution which is chartered, incorporated, licensed, registered or supervised by the Commonwealth, in fulfillment of the requirements of a degree, diploma, certificate or course of study at any such institution.
 - (2) "Prepare" means to create, write, or in any way produce in whole or substantial part, a term paper, thesis, dissertation, essay, report or other written, recorded, pictorial, artistic or other assignment for a fee.
 - (b) Sale of assistance to student.--No person shall sell or offer for sale to any student enrolled in a university, college, academy, school or other educational institution within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania any assistance in the preparation, research or writing of a dissertation, thesis, term paper, essay, report or other written assignment knowing, or under the circumstances having reason to know, that said assignment is intended for submission either in whole or substantial part under said student's name to such educational institution in fulfillment of the requirements for a degree, diploma, certificate or course of study.
 - (c) Sale or distribution of assignment to student.--No person shall sell or offer for distribution any dissertation, thesis, term paper, essay, report or other written assignment to any student enrolled in a university, college, academy, school or any other institution within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania knowing, or under the circumstances having reason to know, that said assignment is intended for submission either in whole or

Figure 6. Screenshot from Florida State University College of Law Resource Centre.

<https://guides.law.fsu.edu/termpapermills>

At the present time, contract cheating is not illegal in Canada.

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Canadian Perspective

As of 2018, Canada tied the UK for second place in terms of students around the world who place online orders for completion of academic work, with the USA taking top spot (Lancaster, 2018). This is up significantly from 2006, when Clarke & Lancaster ranked the top countries in world in the following order: (1) United States; (2) United Kingdom; (3) Australia; and (4) Canada (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006).

Key point: Contract cheating is a problem in Canada.

Using Curtis & Clare's (2017) average self-report data of 3.5% of students admitting to contract cheating, I developed some estimates for about the prevalence of contract cheating in Canada (Eaton, 2018). I drew from Statistics Canada data relating post-secondary enrollments in a variety of post-secondary institutions, including both universities and colleges, and used the average self-reported in the Curtis & Clare (2017) to estimate that over 71,000 post-secondary students in Canada may be engaging in the practice of buying academic work online.

Postsecondary students in Canada	Overall enrollment	Possible contract cheaters
University and College	2,034,957	71,223

Table 1. Estimates for contract cheating in Canada, based on 2015/2016 Statistics Canada data:

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/educ71a-eng.htm>

Lack of Reporting as a Complicating Factor

In Canada, the problem of contract cheating is under-researched and under reported, compared to other countries. Factors relating to the lack of detection include:

1. **Lack of Awareness** – There is a need for more faculty development, conversation and awareness.

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2. **Denial** – Because these transactions often happen online, they are effectively creating an underground academic black market. That, combined with the majority of data being self-reported, leads to a lack of hard evidence. As a result, some dismiss the importance of the issue.
3. **Difficult to detect**- Contract cheating is much more difficult than outright plagiarism to detect.

The United Kingdom's QAA (2017) has pointed out “that absence of identified cases does not always mean that there is no cheating; it could mean that cases are not being detected or not being appropriately investigated” (p. 31). In other words, educators must be aware of the problem and report suspected cases of contract cheating.

Conclusions

In Canada, as in other countries, we need to start doing a much better job of acknowledging that contract cheating exists and make a commitment to taking action against it. We need support for faculty members to learn how to detect it, as well as awareness campaigns for students so they are aware that even if contract cheating is not illegal it is nevertheless an egregious form of academic misconduct. For students in the medical and health programs, the underlying ethical issues cannot be ignored. As Lancaster (2015) stated, “the problem appears more crucial in health than some other academic disciplines since here fitness for practice is important and human lives may be at stake” (p. 1). It is imperative for medical and health educators to send a strong and clear message to students that we expect them to *learn* and that submitting their assignments must demonstrate, first and foremost, *evidence of learning*. Turning in academic work purchased online provides no evidence of learning and furthermore, it violates the unwritten agreement that it is the educator's role to help students learn without interference from a third party.

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How to cite this paper (APA 6th): Eaton, S. E. (2019, February 15). *The Ethics of Outsourcing: Contract Cheating in Medicine and Health Sciences*. Paper presented at the Orthopaedic Surgery Citywide Rounds, Calgary, Canada.

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Presenter Bio

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How to cite this paper (APA 6th): Eaton, S. E. (2019, February 15). *The Ethics of Outsourcing: Contract Cheating in Medicine and Health Sciences*. Paper presented at the Orthopaedic Surgery Citywide Rounds, Calgary, Canada.