

Authorship and its issues: Need to consider seriously

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The misconduct in medical research and publication has been considered widespread by the journal editors and serious academicians. This presumption appears to be supported by fact that a very little empirical research has been performed in medical sciences especially in underdeveloped or developing countries¹. This trend has been widely attributed to enhanced trend in “pressure to publish” which is resulted in the principle of “publish or perish”, and this ultimately leads to increase prevalence in publication misconduct. Due to this, many serious trends or problems including duplication of work, data fabrication, failure to obtain participant informed consent, by passing ethical concerns, plagiarism, redundant publication, authorship issues and so on has become more prevalent^{2,3}. The most common and pressing concerns faced by the editors are authorship assignment and authorship disputes.

An “author is a person who creates a work, e.g., a novel, a movie, or a scientific research article”³. In my view in this definition, the latter, is a special beast because creative freedom is very limited for him while writing up his scientific results as compared to first two. It’s important to get authorship right because it more or less renders directly to the career development and in project funding. Similarly, the authorship order can also make a difference in career progression and promotion in one with fewer options⁴. That’s why the rules matter. It’s a matter of fairness to get justified authorship rights. Therefore, it should be as clear as possible on the principal of what is acceptable and what is not.

The first and important question is who is an author? At the other end a person can be named as an author even if he has not contributed in project or substantially in actual writing of manuscript. In true sense, a research paper involves more than only conception of idea and manuscript writing because before writing phase it involves several stages like planning, execution, ethical issues, data collection, data analysis and interpretation. Therefore, usually many researchers, with highly specialized expertise, work together on a research project. Among them some were titled as authors, others as contributors or acknowledged depending the contribution in the project^{4,5}.

In defining the authorship criteria or roles, the excellent guidelines (also called the Vancouver Convention or criteria) were issued by ICJME (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors)⁶ and adopted by majority of medical journals⁷. Some of the biomedical journals, don’t follow ICJME guidelines for authorship and have their own or follow some other guidelines. For example, some journals publish authors list according to an author-rated contribution level i.e. 1st authors are presumed to have contributed more than 2nd author and so on. The last author is usually a “senior” author in supervisory role or “principal investigator”^{2,7}. In spite of these guidelines, many manuscripts have inappropriate author ship. The range of inappropriate author ship described by CSE (Council of Scientific Editors) comprises of gift” authorship, “guest” authorship, “ghost” authorship”, “honorary,” or “anonymous” authorship³. “Gift or Guest” authorship as name implies is titled to those undeserved authors who do not meet criteria of authorship appropriately⁸. This is the most commonly manifested flagrant abuse in medical community. It refers to inclusion of someone as a co-author who does not or have insignificant input in paper or research project. Motives of this vary, ranging from nepotism to reciprocating the previously gained favors, to increasing number of publications in perception “carry gravitas”^{5,8}. Different factors play a role in this inappropriate nomination such as job demands, promotion requirements, peers and departmental pressures or increased pressure from superiors to be included etc. In addition, inappropriate authors are also included as a result of ignorance of authorship criteria, or due to ignorance about other domains of recognizing contributions in manuscript like acknowledgments section etc⁹. Moreover, the junior faculty, interns or trainee usually come under a difficult situation when approached by their senior colleagues with an expectation or demand to be included as an author. Ethical researchers and authors have called for abolition of this practice by appealing to researchers on deontological grounds, that this is a fraudulent practice, and on consequentialist considerations this practice should be considered something like a poisoned chalice for medical practice and research^{9,10}.

The “Ghost authorship” refers to the practice of not citing a person who fulfils authorship criteria as co-authors⁵. The authorship right is omitted intentionally or mistakenly which is clearly an unjustified practice, leading to usurping the intellectual rights of aggrieved person’s and utilising his findings or data over which one does not have a moral (possibly legal too) claim of ownership. Ranging from flagrant plagiarism (use of others data) to unintentional omission, these errors can be destructive to the profession, inter-personal relations and future collaborative efforts. This issue is equally serious and a cause of much discontent especially among junior colleagues^{5,11,12}.

Authorship order is another commonly encountered issue lies in every day tussles reported in medical publication. In case of multiple authors, the ordering of authors, especially who will be in the 1st and last position, because of the particular recognition of these positions among the academic community is very important^{2,12}.

So, what is responsibility of editor or editorial board and how does they deal with these disputes? Editors often face challenges in assessing authorship or authorship disputes of manuscripts submitted for publication. Realistically, it is not possible for the editor or editorial board to amicably police the authorship issues of individual manuscripts. So, this responsibility fell upon each participant author individually to warrant the integrity of their manuscript, including authors or contributors’ appropriate credit and also avoid inappropriate inclusion of colleagues who does not qualify the authorship criteria. It is recommended that the first author or

corresponding author should undertake the responsibility of the appropriate or justified recognition and inclusion of all who has contributed substantially as an author. The rest of contributors who don't fulfil authorship criteria properly as an author should be added as contributor in acknowledgment section^{5,10}.

By quoting this age-old adage that "prevention is better than cure," some recommendations or steps are suggested to minimize the prevalence of unethical authorship inclusion or disputes. To avoid authorship disputes due to ignorance of researcher, the journals should chart, publish and endorse the authorship criteria and its guidelines clearly on their website. These guidelines should be checked strictly for compliance. The journals should develop a mechanism to identify and deal with these issues in a resolute manner. The awareness should also be created among authors that an ignorance about this malpractice is not considered an excuse for misconduct¹¹. Those participants who had a contributed in some way in the project but do not qualify for authorship, should be acknowledged in section of acknowledgement instead of giving authorship credit⁸. Another practice i.e. contributor ship instead of authorship of manuscript is also suggested in literature, which involves no authors ranking; rather authors are listed with their contribution in manuscript or research in the byline¹². Similarly, in case of multicenter research or paper with too many coauthors, group authorship is recommended and it is adopted by some journals. This practice may be considered in special circumstances because it has not gained popularity due to comments that that this practice will undermine the importance of authorship^{3,10}.

To avoid gift/ honorary or ghost authorship issue especially when senior faculty is involved is very difficult and the official remedy of this issues is not possible because of the very reason of their genesis. Moreover, therefore, the junior faculty usually avoid confrontation with their senior colleagues especially in same departments or institutions. In this regard, an ombudsman channel may be recommended as a confidential and informal channel to resolve such issues¹⁰.

The main author or researcher or institution has ethical responsibility to decide all final determinations about authorship. It should be remembered that this inappropriate inclusion has multiple negative ramifications academically like justified authors credit dilution, and inappropriate enhanced credentials of non-deserving author. Though, to resist this malpractice is at time challenging, even than the fair and authoritative decisions regarding authorship should be communicated directly to all involved^{5,10,11}.

As an ethical researcher or clinician, we should not take authorship just a list of names in a manuscript. In reality, it is a practice to establish the responsibility, authenticity, integrity, credit and accountability in research. So, it should be free from any unethical concerns, mistakes, fraud, misconception, misrepresentation and unfair exclusions or inclusions of participants. Moreover, the research project should be supported by all necessary documentations and protocols and documentation that lend towards the sanctity and credibility of the publication process. In this epoch, where professional competition is intense, authorship is considered one of a gate ways to success, promotions, professional and academic incentives, it becomes more imperative to preserve and maintain the sacredness of research and publication process. This responsibility falls equally on both the researcher and the publishers. The authorship decision should be predetermined and well informed by the researcher which should be based on mutually passable agreement blended with guidelines. One should not forget that it also questions or tests our professional integrity.

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