

Editorial

Responsibility and accountability of authors and co-authors

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The question of manuscript authorship is one that has been repeatedly addressed in the literature. However, we still encounter manuscripts that raise the question of whether all of the individuals listed are justified authors. This editorial will discuss authorship, and remind authors or potential authors of their responsibility and accountability. Authorship provides credit to the individuals, department, hospital, or institution. The majority of academic institutions use publications to evaluate the productivity and scholarship of an individual, and as a basis for academic promotion and research funding. Unfortunately, this can in some cases lead to ethical misconduct in terms of the authors listed on a publication.

Authorship criteria

Although most authors have a general idea about 'authorship', they may not have a full understanding of guidelines published by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, 2008), which state three criteria that must be fulfilled by each author of a manuscript: (i) substantial contribution to the conception and design, or the acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; (ii) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; (iii) final approval of the version to be published.

Institutional guidelines of authorship

Who is accountable?

Academic institutions recognize the importance of authorship and provide regulation. Misuse of authorship might lead to questions regarding the integrity of study, the honesty, and accountability of the authors. Similar to plagiarism, this could be embarrassing not only to the authors, but also to the institution itself.

McGill University's policy on research ethics emphasizes the principles of honesty, trust, collegiality, and fair play (McGill University Policy On Research Ethics, 2008). In attribution of authorship, it encourages participation of research collaborators to be established as early as possible, including potential authorship. Administrative relationship to the investigation does not qualify a person for co-authorship. The Policy also states: 'The principal author is responsible for including as co-authors all persons who are entitled to co-authorship, and none

who are inappropriate. Other contributions should be indicated in a footnote or an acknowledgements section.'

Violation of authorship

'Put my name in your paper and I will do the same.'

A junior author may share authorship with a colleague who has made limited intellectual contribution to the manuscript, in the hope that his or her name would appear in the colleague's publication. This arrangement would spuriously boost the number of their publications and their productivity. A senior author may not question a junior author who lists him or her as an honorary author, in the belief that honorary authorship is a norm, and because the junior author is a member of the department or division under his or her direction. Not only does this reflect poor judgment, the senior author also provides an unfortunate example for the juniors. Bury (2007) rightfully stated that authorship must be earned and not assumed. Honorary authorship is clearly wrong and unprofessional.

The directors of an institution, a clinical service or a laboratory deserve special attention, as their roles can vary from that of a facilitator to an active participant in conducting and completing the study. There is no doubt that a manager who fulfills the criteria of ICMJE (2008) should be listed as an author. Managers in administrative positions whose role is to facilitate the conduct of the study could be acknowledged in the acknowledgement section. When authorship is in doubt, the journal should be informed for further evaluation and decision by the editors and reviewers.

Order of authorship

'This journal has no limit on authorship. Let us put all our names in the paper'

With a few exceptions, journals limit the number of authors on a paper submitted for publication, in order to reduce the number of potential authorship violations. Some journals do not limit the number of authors, relying on the honesty and integrity of the individuals. With respect to the order, the first author is usually the person who performs the research and writes the manuscript. Other authors follow in descending

order, and the most experienced contributor, normally the one who supervises the first author, is placed last. If there is more than one experienced contributor, it is reasonable for the senior person who carried out most of the work to be placed as the last author. The majority of journals leave the order of authorship up to the authors. Harvard University guidelines request that authors should not only describe the contribution of each author, but also state why the order of authorship has been assigned (Authorship Guidelines, 1999). Deciding authorship before starting a project may be the best way to proceed.

Academic misdemeanour

Editors and journal reviewers may detect some irregularities in authorship leading to rejection of the manuscript (Warner, 2007). However, the final responsibility lies with the authors themselves. Similar to falsifying data, misrepresentation of authorship is an academic misdemeanour, an embarrassment, and may lead to a disciplinary action by the Institute employing

the authors, and/or by the Journal. The authors, departments, and institutions are accountable. We call for honest, responsible, and ethical publishing.

References

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