

Ethics of authorship in scientific publications

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Abstract

Authorship should be based on the contribution provided by each author who has made a significant scientific contribution to a study. Credit of authorship has important academic, social and financial implications and is bound by guidelines, which aid in preserving transparency during writing and publication of research material so as to prevent violation of ethics.

KEY WORDS: Authorship, ethics, guidelines, publication, research

INTRODUCTION

“Searching for the truth is the noblest occupation of man; its publication is a duty.”

– *Madame de Stael*

Documentation of research findings are very important as they pave the way for future research and make the findings more comprehensive. Therefore, the focus needs to be applied on the type of research being conducted and should be judged based on their outcome. This is possible only through documentation and writing, preparing a manuscript can be a wonderful yet exhaustive experience. Unfortunately, when such contributions are not awarded accordingly, it is considered as a form and abuse of authorship.[1]

Who is an author?

An author of a scientific/research manuscript is one contributes mentally and spiritually to the scientific content, molds the research aspect in a presentable and understandable form. The efforts involved are tremendous and creditworthy.[1,2]

THE NEED TO CREDIT AN AUTHOR

Credit of authorship has important academic, social and financial implications. Authorship should be based on the contribution provided by each author who has made significant scientific contributions to a study. On the other hand, a guarantor must take responsibility for at least one component of the work, should be able to identify who is responsible for each other component and should ideally be confident in their co-authors' ability and integrity. Guidelines for contributorship and guarantorship aid in transparency thereby reducing much of the ambiguity surrounding contributions, they

address many unresolved questions related to the events and efforts that qualify for authorship.[3]

Due to the importance placed on publications in the advancement of scientific careers, which has been catapulted to the status of “Either publish or perish,” determining authorship is an important part of any research process. Transparency on matters related to authorship is necessary throughout the research process and any conflict should be discussed openly with all individuals involved in a project. The determination of authorship is a dynamic process and should never be based on a predetermined decision and involves all individuals involved in the study.[3,4]

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORSHIP

“Quantum theory provides us with a striking illustration of the fact that we can fully understand a connection though we can only speak of it in images and parables.”

– Werner Heisenberg

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has developed guidelines to resolve issues related to crediting of authors in publication.[5] Readers are advised to refer to these standard guidelines, which are Available at www.icmje.org. [5] There are many guidelines available and most of the scientific peer reviewed journals are guided by them which merit and credit authorship based on these, which are essentially based on the principles laid out by the ICMJE. According to the ICMJE, authorship should be credited only if the individual has fulfilled all the following criteria namely, contributed substantially and drafted the manuscript and has given the final approval for the publication of the same.[5] Despite such guidelines in place, violation of crediting authorship still persists and many researchers fail to adhere to these principles in a substantial proportion of peer-reviewed medical journals. Stringent measures are required to resolve problems during writing and publication of research material so as to prevent misunderstandings. The publication of research papers is deeply mired in unethical behavior, the most significant factors contributing to such effects are:[5,6,7]

- Existence of an uneven power relationship between the principal investigator and the researcher, which has a bearing on the objective decision making or an entitlement to authorship
- Since, authorship is interlinked with career enhancements, people are motivated to magnify these.

Dispute of order of names in the manuscript is far more difficult to decide upon than over who will or will not be included as the co-authors.[7] There are many instances why such disputes occur. Mostly articles are cited by the first author and they suggest that the first author should be the one who has contributed the maximum to the article. Hence, logically the author with the most substantial contribution should be credited to be the first author. Furthermore, the first author conveys that this individual has been consistently linked with the article apart from being the major contributor. However, occasional discredits have occurred and pressure from a senior member leads to an undue alteration of the author positions. The second and later authors do not necessarily imply their relative poor contribution and often this is far from being the truth. The existence of a standard measured format for placement of authors according to their contributions is often most desirable, but on the other hand to create such a tool would involve mechanical/rigid/rather structured means and such a tool can never be perfect.[5,7]

Despite existing guidelines often irregularities are observed and they are more subtle as the parties involved are disparate in their positions, the individual in a superior position is likely to gain. These are notably the “guest authorship” or “ghost authorship” or “pressured authorship” or “divided publication” or “duplicate publication.” The reasons for such notoriety are many one among which is the pressure to publish.[7]

The unethical practice of hovering around credit/discredit of authorship cannot be simply solved by setting of guidelines. The current call for publications being used to ladder up or down an individual's rank/promotion needs to be addressed. The academic system should modify itself from meriting researchers based on their publications.

“Authorship is not a trade, it is an inspiration; authorship does not keep an office, its habitation is all out under the sky and everywhere the winds are blowing and the sun is shining and the creatures of God are free.”

– Mark Twain

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