

## EDITORIAL

### Authorship

Enoka Corea  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1450-2098>, Himani Molligoda  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9216-9035>, Co-Editors

#### Keywords: Authorship

© Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International License (CC BY-SA 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are attributed and materials are shared under the same license.



Authorship of a paper is the culmination of any research project. Being an author of a paper is considered prestigious and may be necessary for promotion and tenure. Authorship is an area of publication ethics that is often a source of confusion for early career researchers. It is also an area where many disputes are seen and a cause for much heartache, controversy and damaged relationships. Misrepresentation of the contribution to research in the author listings could be considered as a form of research misconduct [1].

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has tried to help editors and authors by publishing a list of criteria for authorship [2]. In brief, an author is one who has contributed significantly to the design, conduct and reporting of the research and is able to take responsibility and accountability for the whole research. However, a judgement on whether a contribution is substantial or not is subject to interpretation.

However, these criteria are often breached. Common gaps in application of these criteria include gift authorship, where authorship is given to persons who have not contributed to the study but are included due to their position e.g. the head of the laboratory or department. Inclusion of the Head may be an unwritten policy or practice of the institution that junior researchers ignore at their peril.

On the other hand, it is also common for seniors to ignore the contribution of junior staff and students to a research and omit them from the author list, even if they have made a considerable contribution to the research outcome. In medical research, we have also noted a tendency for clinicians to ignore the substantial contribution of other categories of staff such as pathologists, microbiologists and radiologists in the diagnosis of rare or unusual disease and omitting to include them as co-authors. It may be a useful rule of thumb for authors and editors to determine whether all those who were essential to the diagnosis and management of the case have been included as co-authors. It is not sufficient that these personnel be included in the acknowledgements as, in many cases, the definitive diagnosis has been made only because of their expertise and efforts. It is also common for researchers from the sponsoring or 'host' site to dismiss the contribution of collaborators in the peripheral sites where the research is conducted.

As there is no longer any restriction on the number of authors it is encouraged that all such contributors be given authorship if the contribution is substantive.

Gift authorship may also occur if the authors feel that including a foreign or senior researcher will increase their chances of publication. This discrimination in publication has been recently discussed [3].

Inclusion of ICMJE criteria when drawing up institutional and departmental publication ethics policies can help to ensure ethical authorship. Another good practice to be followed is to decide on the authorship list and position before the research is published, preferably at the conceptual stage. And definitely before the paper is written. A written authorship agreement will help to iron out any disputes prior to submission.

Educating potential authors via sections on research integrity and publication ethics on journal websites and, most importantly, via their "instructions to authors" with strict application of these criteria by editors of journals (for example journals in SLJOL) is another tool to promote ethical authorship. Inclusion of a section in the final manuscript on "author contributions" (where the corresponding author lists out the significant contribution of each author) can force the researchers to confront this issue. It can also help editors to determine the quantity and quality of the contribution of each author to the paper and whether any significant contributor has been missed e.g. the microbiologist in case reports involving rare and unusual infections. Reviewing the acknowledgements section to ensure that substantial contributions are not being ignored may also help but is not considered a function of the editor.

Having measure in place to resolve author disputes before or after submission, through dispute resolution services such as arbitration has been suggested [4].

## References

1. Albert T, and Wager E, on behalf of COPE Council. How to handle authorship disputes: a guide for new researchers. Version 1. September 2003. <https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2018.1.1>
2. <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html>
3. Niriella MA, De Silva AP, de Silva HJ, et al. 'Is there racism in academic medical publishing?' BMJ Evidence-Based Medicine Published Online First: 28 July 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjebm-2020-111487>
4. Faulkes, Z. Resolving authorship disputes by mediation and arbitration. Res Integr Peer Rev 3, 12 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-018-0057-z>