Abuse of authorship

Authorship is one of the hotly debated subjects among the medical journal editors. Much has been written; yet little success has been achieved to eliminate the abuses and pitfalls of authorship. Our recent experience is a case in point. Five authors submitted a manuscript a little over one and a half years ago which was accepted for publication. At the time of going to press the authors withdrew it to enable them to patent the product described in the manuscript. Recently, the same manuscript was resubmitted after a gap of one year. The new manuscript was no different from the one that was withdrawn except that one of the authors had been replaced by another. The corresponding author was asked to explain the deletion and addition on the byline. He clarified that “the missing author (in the resubmitted version) was included in the original manuscript by mistake of the secretary who cut and pasted the list of authors from another paper and this mistake was corrected in the resubmitted version”. But the manuscript file we maintained in the IJP editorial office had a different story to tell. The missing author had, in fact, signed the guidelines for authorship.

The authors in the above case have probably committed a double sin – gifting authorship to one who did not qualify and removing from the list the one who deserved to be an author. Anyone who has gone through the “Authors’ Declaration form” (IJP) would vouch that it is reasonably elaborate and hence it is difficult to believe that someone would sign it by mistake. Anything contrary to this dictum is considered unethical. Are the contributors to the IJP not aware of the code of practices for authorship in spite of the guidelines in the declaration form? Many authors caught abusing authorship conveniently claim ignorance which in my opinion is just an excuse since the declaration form more than adequately spells out the guidelines for authorship.

Do authors take the authorship guidelines lightly and ignore the ‘edicts’ willfully? Perhaps yes. This is the reason why some journals have made it mandatory for the authors to declare the role of each one on the byline. I am sure readers of the IJP are familiar with the common abuses of authorship such as departmental/institutional heads insisting on their name in each and every paper, postgraduates being asked to write a review or a paper and then being deprived of authorship, faculty from other departments (especially clinical departments) receiving authorship for “giving cases” and senior members of staff getting authorship for “permitting use of equipment/laboratories”. Unfortunately, the authors/co-authors of such papers are usually far too junior to refuse to include such persons as authors, fearing that the vindictive backlash will be swift and detrimental to their careers. It appears that gift authorship has been established as a ‘tradition’ which is difficult to eradicate.¹

Authorship implies not just credit but responsibility too. Authors are responsible for what is said in their paper. They are accountable for the contents and are expected to publicly defend their work if and when doubts are raised. Shirking this responsibility is also considered unethical. There have been instances where the authors eagerly took the credit but declined to take responsibility when the integrity of the work was questioned. The likelihood of facing such embarrassments is more for those accepting gift or honorary authorships.

The current criteria for authorship are considered to be restrictive and unreasonable by some authors.² For example, the nature of a paper may be such that all authors cannot take responsibility for the entire content. The participation of some authors, though important may be limited. This happens when each author contributes to a more specialized part of the study. The system of authorship fails when the number of authors of an article is large since the credit as well as the responsibility get diluted.³ The failure will be very evident when none of the authors is willing to take responsibility for the integrity of the entire content. This is the reason why ‘contributorship’ in place of ‘authorship’ has been suggested.⁴ Contributors should declare their role in the study and this information appears along with the paper. They get credit for the appropriate portions of the work for which they take public responsibility. One or two contributors will play the role of ‘guarantor’ for the integrity of the entire work. Though the concepts of contributorship and guarantorship and the demand to change the designation from ‘Author’ to ‘Contributor’ have been propounded more than five years ago, there are not many takers for it.

Will imposing the authors to declare their role in the study
eliminate all abuses of authorship? Definitely not. If the declarations are published along with the paper, the fear of being exposed could discourage the abusers of the system. Moreover, the signed declarations might give away the authors if they change their stand later as happened in the case described at the beginning. This will deter at least a few; the more determined ones however, will continue to abuse the system.

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References

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