The Journal of International Advanced Otology

Editorial

The Problem of Gift and Honorary Authorship - Who is an Author?

It all began on chilly autumn weekend morning as I settled into a comfortable chair on the back deck and fired up the laptop. I waited to link up with the website of the Journal of International Advanced Otology and punched in my name and password. Soon enough a potential publication imploring acceptance lit up the screen. It was an interesting and rare case report from a certain Western European country. The images were crisp and illuminating, the prose was tidy and precise, and the references adequate - - in short the article was well written. It deserved to be published. Then I looked at the list of authors (I generally do not look at the authors prior to reviewing articles hoping that my personal bias does not manifest itself). There were eight authors! How many surgeons were needed to write a simple case report? Was this author inflation? If so, why? Had all the names mentioned really contributed meaningfully to the article? If so, how much and in what form? Is there any earthly way of measuring the contribution of each? Had I too not been guilty of this practice, decades ago and in another country? Why then was this bothering me?

In an editorial with the provocative title, "From Ape to Author" Thomas W. Elwood [1] observed that in the September 2, 1993 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine 972 authors from 15 different countries involving a clinical trial comprising 41,021 patients at 1,081 hospitals were listed in the appendix. In an August 14, 2008 issue of the Journal of Instrumentation, which described the Large Hadron Collider 32, pages were needed to list 2926 authors and their affiliations. The question that remains is how can the contributions of each author be assessed? While the aforementioned forms of this phenomenon are exceedingly rare, more subtle forms of the problem exist, and appear to be more widespread than one would expect. That begs the question: who is an author?

The ICMJE [2] recommends that authorship be based on the following 4 criteria:

1. *Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND*
2. *Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND*
3. *Final approval of the version to be published; AND*
4. *Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.* It goes on to say that, *"All those designated as authors should meet all four criteria for authorship, and all who meet the four criteria should be identified as authors. Those who do not meet all four criteria should be acknowledged."*

Failure to meet all four criteria leads to abuses. In an excellent article on the subject Kovacs [3] speaks about the different forms.

The first is the issue of honorary authorship also called guest or gift authorship. Here authorship is ascribed to an individual or individuals, usually well known in their fields, such as heads of departments or laboratories, which may not meet the ICMJE criteria. Another form that he describes is coercive authorship, where a senior (and usually better known) faculty member coerces a junior author to include his/her name, knowing that the junior is either too scared or unable to protest. Safran [4] described another type of coercive authorship when researchers provide data on condition that they be named as authors on all articles in which the data is used, despite the fact that do not strictly meet ICMJE criteria. The worst form of abuse is a ghost authorship in which an individual who meets the authorship criteria is not even mentioned in the article.

The prevalence of honorary and ghost authorship is not small. In respected medical journals it is estimated at 21%, and that number may be much higher in less prominent journals and in certain countries [5]. In a self-reported study 33% of corresponding authors admitted to having honorary authors, and that the practice was found to be more common in Europe and Asia [6]. Wager [7] performed an observational study on prolific authors and found an egregious case in which one author was named on a paper every 10 days. It is highly unlikely if not impossible for any author to meet all the criteria recommended by the ICMJE at this frequency. And yet the practice continues. Does an individual who is guiding research, and who is capable of obtaining funding, and is in essence a manager of a project have the right to authorship? The answers are not simple. In a system that rewards authorship and gives it the appearance of intellectual capital it is likely that, as Kovacs suggests, rule-abiding behavior

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may be a loosing strategy. Funding sources often want big academic names attached to their studies. Not including the name of a head of the department when asked to do so in some countries may be a career-ending move.

Negotiations between authors can only be fair if all parties in a negotiation have equal status and power. This is often not the case. Junior researchers often find themselves vulnerable and exploited. In my personal opinion other than the integrity of the researcher there is no real way to stop the practice. Theoretically the only way to reduce this unethical behavior is to prevent it from becoming a winning strategy. This is easier said than done and may not be possible at all. Kovacs [3] enunciates the problem very well but spells out few if any solutions. One solution suggested is by expecting that each coauthor's relative contribution to the article be quantified in fractional credits and expressed as a byline beside their name. Here the sum of the individual contributions cannot be more than 1 (100%). How this could be made to work honestly in a system of an unequal power structure it does not say.

Others have suggested more drastic solutions. Adams [8] wrote a provocative piece titled -Time to kill the scientific "author"? In it he suggests a radical solution, which is ascribed to Daniel Paul O'Donnell, a professor of English at the University of Lethbridge in Canada. In Professor O'Donnell's view science is for the most part not an individual pursuit and is collaborative and hence referring to collaborators as authors is incorrect. He suggests that collaborators be treated as rolling credits after a movie and be referred to as participants. No one participant is to be favored over another.

A third strategy, which may be more practical, is for editors of journals and the scientific community to agree to publish the names of a reasonable number of authors (for example three for case reports, and five or six for full length scientific studies). The contribution of each of the authors ought to be stated. If more individuals need to be acknowledged, that could be done on a case-by-case basis and at the discretion of the editor. But is this fair? What if there are truly ten individuals associated with a publication who meet authorship criteria?

The primary goal of the Journal of International Advanced Otology is to be the purveyor and disseminator of scientific knowledge at the highest level. This has got to meet the highest standards of excellence and without compromising ethics. A privilege of being an Associate Editor is the ability to view articles before they are published, and a major responsibility is to help the Editor achieve the Journal's goals. In the current climate and the accepted system of peer review, authorship is here to stay. Problems with the order of authorship, duplicate submissions and publications, redundant publication, plagiarism, falsification, and fabrication of data, have been described [9]. These are arguably more damaging on a societal basis than honorary authorship and each of these topics can be the subject of separate editorials.

However both our characters and reputations are moored in our ethics and our sense of justice… once lost both are hard to regain. It is time for us all in the scientific community to police ourselves.

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DOI: 10.5152/iao.2017.31013

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