
SPECIAL ARTICLE

Authorship

Nares Sukcharoen MD.

Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10300, Thailand

Listing the authors tells readers who did the work and should ensure that the right people get the credit, and take responsibility for the research. According to the guidance from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) (also known as the Vancouver group)⁽¹⁾, authorship credit should be based only on

1. substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data,
2. drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content,
3. final approval of the version to be published.

All conditions must all be met. Acquisition of funding, collection of data, or general supervision of the research group, alone, does not justify authorship. All persons designated as authors should qualify for authorship, and all those who qualify should be listed. Each author should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content.

When a large, multi-center group has conducted the work, the group should identify the individuals who accept direct responsibility for the manuscript.⁽²⁾ These individuals should fully meet the criteria for authorship defined above and editors will ask these individuals to complete journal-specific author and conflict of interest disclosure forms. When submitting a group author manuscript, the corresponding author should clearly indicate the preferred citation and should clearly

identify all individual authors as well as the group name. Journals will generally list other members of the group in the acknowledgements. The National Library of Medicine indexes the group name and the names of individuals the group has identified as being directly responsible for the manuscript.

In theory, authorship sounds straightforward, but in practice it often causes many problems, such as, junior research was omitted from the author list or replaced by others.

This review was written to help researchers prevent the authorship problems. It provide suggestions for good authorship practice that should reduce the incidence of such dilemmas.

Authorship problems

The common authorship problems are gift or honorary authorship and ghost authorship.

Gift or honorary authorship

An honorary author is one whose name is listed as a coauthor, by virtue of being the chief of a laboratory or a section, being the head of a department, or holding an otherwise prestigious position, despite the fact that one did not participate actively in the conduct of the research and did not have knowledge of the daily progress of problems of each investigator. A gift author is one whose name is listed as a coauthor but take little or no part in the research.

Ghost authorship

This term is used in two ways. It usually refers to professional writers (often paid by commercial sponsors) whose role is not acknowledged. Although such writers rarely meet ICMJE criteria, since they are not involved in the design of studies, or the collection or interpretation of data, it is important to acknowledge their contribution, since their involvement may represent a potential conflict of interest. The term can also be used to describe people who made a significant contribution to a research project (and meet the ICMJE criteria) but are not listed as authors. The ICMJE guidelines clearly condemn this practice and state that "All persons designated as authors should qualify for authorship, and all those who qualify should be listed."

Reduction of the author problems

Preventing a problem is often better than solving it. Therefore, the following three principles are recommended.

Encourage a culture of ethical authorship

One problem is that people who are being unethical about authorship are simply following local customs and practice, so that the culture will change. The library should have at least one book on publication ethics. The university or department should be encouraged to set up the policy on authorship. Start discussing authorship at the beginning of the research

All research team members should be gathered and authorship should be discussed in a face-to-face meeting at the beginning of the research. Discussion about authorship should be continued as the project evolves, especially when new people get involved. A written record of the discussion should be kept.

Decide authorship before writing each article

Many authorship difficulties arise because of misplaced expectations and poor communication. Authorship should be confirmed and informed of any changes with written note before writing each article.

There has been considerable debate in several major medical journals regarding whether there is a need for explicit reporting of author contributions.⁽³⁾ The growing trend among biomedical journals is to require authors to provide a description of what each has contributed. The goals of this disclosure are to "discourage abuses of authorship, permit credit for all substantial contributions, and inform editors and readers of who stands behind each key portion of the work and who is prepared to vouch for the work as a whole."⁽⁴⁾

Opponents of reporting individual author contributions believe that readers are not interested in this information and that doing so may lead to hair-splitting negotiations among authors regarding the amount of work done.⁽⁵⁾

In conclusion, there is no universally agreed definition of authorship. As a minimum, authors should take responsibility for a particular section of the study. Accountability and credit are central issues in the publication of scientific research. The award of authorship should balance intellectual contributions to the conception, design, analysis and writing of the study against the collection of data and other routine work. If there is no task that can reasonably be attributed to a particular individual, then that individual should not be credited with authorship. To avoid disputes over attribution of academic credit, it is helpful to decide early on in the planning of a research project who will be credited as authors, as contributors, and who will be acknowledged. All authors must take public responsibility for the content of their paper. The multidisciplinary nature of much research can make this difficult, but this can be resolved by the disclosure of individual contributions.⁽⁶⁾

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