

Issues of authorship; Journey from credit to accountability

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Author is a person who writes or creates a new document¹. Authorship can be given to a person who generates an idea of research or contributes in collection of data to prove a certain fact or does the analysis and interpretation of relevant data. The author is accountable for the concept, write up, interpretation and analysis of facts related to the lives and death of patients, evidences related to the presentation of diseases, effects of drugs and truths about the prevalence patterns of disease². Cross-institutional researches can be conducted by the Clinicians and must build international relationships to foster goodwill to plan for future collaborations with groups who have access to patients and data³. Authorship of a medical paper is an honour that has to be earned through genuine contribution and needs a declaration. An informed consent highlights the transparency of the sincere intent for the publication⁴.

Ethical and moral values need to be followed in order to publish an authentic research². Nominating a person as an author who has not fulfilled any of the above criteria is unethical. It may fall under the category of gift, ghost or courtesy authorship^{5,6}. One researcher does all the hard work but at the time of publication many additional names are added because of some friendship gesture, favour from someone or even some pressure from the seniors⁷. Junior researchers may add the names seeking favour to enhance the process of publication. Funding for research may be facilitated by adding the name of some known researcher⁸. Gifting a publication to someone may give unfair professional advantage to someone while applying for jobs or appearing for an interview or for promotion⁹. The number of authors who are given the credit of authorship is also limited by the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council which grants the certificate required for the promotion to a higher post. The factor which are encouraging this unethical practice is publish or perish policy. In Pakistan because the number of published articles are related to the promotions. There is a certain number of papers to qualify for the post of the assistant associate or the professor¹⁰. The student or the post graduate trainee or subordinate or colleague may add the name of any other person to get some benefit in future⁷. The name of the senior also increases the probability of early publication. Sometimes there is financial assistance for the research from a laboratory or some organization and in reward the authorship is given¹¹. There is also a reshuffle of the order of the authors and the juniors despite being doing too much work are lowest in the order. Blood relations are given credits for a publication and thus it falsely raises the competency level of an individual which may create professional jealousies¹².

Authorship should not be a reward for any form of favour or friendship and less participation can and should be mentioned in the "Acknowledgments." The Council of Science Editors (CSE) clearly implies that even the professional companies who are hired for the write up should be acknowledged only as they play no role in conduction of the study. Some surveys have been done which show the evidence of gift authorship is approaching to almost 50% which is alarming¹¹. Results have shown that in Korea gift authorship is common and in America a higher percentage of cases have been listed as courtesy authorship^{9,11}. The question is that whether gift authorship falls in the same category of unethical practice as falsification of data or plagiarism. The answer is that it lacerates the integrity of medical practice almost as much as the other two because it is a currency for promoting a medical career³. A number of committees have been established to try to ensure that only substantive contributors receive appropriate credit. These include organizations such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), Surgery Journal Editors Group Consensus Statement (SJEG), and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)¹³. In 1985, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) first recommended certain criteria for authorship within the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals. These have been updated many times to improve the quality of research. Most of the authentic journals accept only those articles who fulfil these guidelines and strongly discourage the honorary or gift authorship^{12,14}. They make these guidelines as a part of the author's instructions. There are evidences of certain journals disqualifying a research once gift authorship is proved. This is also being tackled by some journals by asking authors contribution³. The authors have to specify the contribution categorically and is then signed by all authors. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), which has 4000 journals as members also emphasizes to have less number of authors¹². There are limited research opportunities and lack of financial support further adds to the barriers in conducting meaningful researches⁵.

Putting a substantial intellect contribution to a research requires ample time plus a sincere effort to look for truthful facts. Despite setting certain guidelines the editors cannot discriminate between a genuine contribution and a gift authorship. It is the joint responsibility of authors, institutes and journal editors to judge and discriminate the original contributor and acknowledged contributor by designing certain principles. A process of verification of genuine contribution should be generated to identify ghost authorship. If left unchecked, such unethical practices could lead to loss of faith in research and researcher which is in no one's interest.

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