

Dilemmas in Authorship

Authorship confers esteem and a sense of accomplishment to many an academic and researcher. Seeing one's name in the byline is at once exhilarating and rewarding. Constructing the list of authors in a paper seem to be quite straightforward. Yet it is far from innocuous. In fact, authorship issues are as important as title issues in the world of scientific publishing. It is even observed that "problems related to the definition of authorship are much more frequent than frauds in publications," citing a paper by Claxton on the controversies in this area.^{1,2}

The issues are numerous and we will focus on three: attributability, accountability, and equity.

Author attribution is fraught with challenges. Too few and there may be omission of individuals with substantial contributions, too little and doubts are cast on actual participation. Often overlooked are those who contributed to the technical aspects of a paper.³ These contributors are often considered as "hired help," yet if they make decisions on complex treatment and analysis of data, provide nuanced interpretation in the discussion and review, and edit the final draft for publication, they are rightfully considered as authors.⁴ Already, many clinical trials to date include biostatisticians as authors and collaborators, and considerably improve the work.⁵ On the other hand, many publications report a considerable number of authors casting doubt as to the actual participation of every individual.⁶ While the number of authors may be understandable in large scale multicenter trials where design, data collection, and analysis involve the collaboration of numerous individuals, caution should also be exercised as to including personalities deemed as guest or even ghost authorships. The complex dynamics in the academe where pressure and politics play a prominent role influence this phenomenon, a role many are hesitant to acknowledge.⁷

Indeed, every author is accountable, and the misconduct of one is the misconduct of the entire list of authors indicated in the byline. Should such misconduct be discovered, all are implicated in the eventually retracted article. Therefore, especially for senior researchers, a thorough review of the work and a scrutiny of the collaborators should be performed before allowing the publication to include one's name. Models of author accountability — whether joint accountability or assigned solely to the primary or corresponding author — have been proposed.⁸ Recently, the use of artificial intelligence (AI), not only in medical writing but in all aspects of the research, have added another dilemma to authorship accountability.⁹ Disclosure forms are now being employed to assess the involvement of AI in the production of scientific literature.

The last issue is equity and justice in authorship. Truly, inclusion of and sequence of listing of authors are likewise influenced by academic politics. Primary authorship, co-lead authorship, last authorship, even sequence of listing is fraught with disagreement. An added issue is the presence of bias against stature, gender, and even nationality.¹⁰⁻¹²

Many an academic journal face these challenges in authorship on a day-to-day basis. Proactive strategies should be employed to minimize conflict.¹³ The ACTA will endeavor to implement these strategies to ensure that what is published in our pages is quality scientific literature where authorship is attributable, accountable, and equitable.

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