

Ghosts and other Apparitions



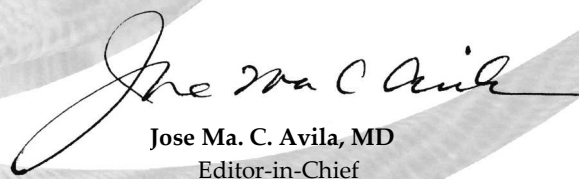
I was looking through some open source journals one afternoon on the world wide web when I came across two similar complaints; letters to the editor of an Asian medical journal complaining about the non-inclusion of a radiologist as author in a case report of a rare medical malady, with a lot of radiologic images included in the report. No, it wasn't the radiologist writing the letter about this unfortunate oversight, if you can call it that; it was the editor of another journal. And, just a day or two after seeing this, I stumbled upon a similar complaint by a reader, this time on why the pathologist was not included as an author in a case report of a rare genetic anomaly, where a lot of pathologic images and descriptions were included and obviously made by a pathologist. And I suddenly realized that this is a major authorship issue that, in the past, we used to ignore here in the Philippines in the early days of the Acta. As a pathologist myself, I used to just grumble at papers that "forget" to include me as an author when I practically wrote a third of the paper with my pathologic descriptions and contributed half the photomicrographs for the report. Pathologists, and perhaps, radiologists become "ghosts" in such papers – conveniently forgotten but lurking around aghast with frustration.

I had recently attended an international editors forum for Western Pacific nations and during the round table discussion on authorship ethics, a prominent editor announced that "in his country, if you are an administrator of a research office, it is mandatory that the administrator becomes first author of all papers emanating from that office, whether he had contributed something to the paper or not." And the same editor asked openly, "why is that so?" Well, I said, "in our country, there are institutions that require inclusion of the chairman as last author in papers whether or not he or she was involved in it." The discussion continued and everyone was shocked with "apparitions" of people as authors, who knew nothing about the papers that were being churned out by other responsible researchers. And everyone knew there was something wrong somewhere and nobody knew what to do about it.

Problems of ghost authorship, gift authorships, and such are much more common than we think, even in developed societies where "publish or perish" is like a religion. In our setting, where medical journalism ethics boards are just starting to be organized in institutions, I have heard of infighting, shouting matches, backstabbing and even behavior bordering on the scandalous on some of these author issues. These are but symptoms of a moral ethic on publishing that is flawed, reckless, and callous. Why do you think the major medical journals now demand disclosure of what each author did in a particular work being reviewed for the journal?

I have always thought that universities should put up their own ethics policies on authorship where majority agree of what is just, moral, and right, based on prevailing cultural norms and values in a particular region or sector. There could be compromises and it may not be perfect, but at least, it is written down as a policy which everyone should follow in the meantime.

What do you think?


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