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Authorship issues in a research article

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Abstract

The authorship issue is a very sensitive area in scientific publications. Fulfilling the authorship criteria of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors is the basis of inclusion as an author in an article. Courtesy authorships have always been regarded as a means of misconduct in the publication world and lead to conflict among authors. This practice often denies an individual the credit that he deserves to be an author for the originality and creativity of his work. There is a need to curb the practice of inappropriate and unethical authorship. A few guidelines and an authorship index have been proposed that determine the author's contribution to scientific writing. Authorship issues from the legal point of view have also been discussed in the article. Awareness programmes and seminars must be conducted to make researchers aware of the need to decide the authorship issues appropriately.

Keywords

Authorship criteria

Conflict of interest

Ghost author
 Gift author
 Guest author
 Research paper



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INTRODUCTION

The term 'author' is derived from the Latin word 'auctor' meaning 'one who produces or a person who causes to grow'.^[1] In ancient times, the 'author' word had a religious basis, like God is the originator and has created the world. The same is true for the author, who is the inventor of their work. With the recognition of publication as a recognised profession in the recent era, communication about new concepts/experimental findings/advances in a field makes recognition of an author an asset in the global scenario.^[1] Appreciation and respect come with publication, but it becomes the responsibility of the author to remain answerable to their work.^[2] Other benefits involve improving job prospects, promotions, job security, recognition among peers, and increased chances of obtaining funding, but with an increase in competitiveness, people tend to be involved in misconduct.

AUTHOR AND AUTHORSHIP

When a person starts a plan, or an idea creates or develops an idea, they are considered an author.^[2] In view of the single person's inventions, the authorship criteria used to follow the 'one author-one publication' rule.^[3] Discoveries of Einstein, Newton and Jenner gained popularity in the world in this time from the late 17th century to the mid-20th century.^[3]

However, the methodologies and technological complexity of the science made the involvement of more than one scholar in a research study. Thus, there was a rise in collaboration among different intellectual experts.^[4] This led to the publication of multi-authored research articles.^[4]

With the involvement of two or more persons working on a paper or a research study for publication, authorship disputes have risen. Many issues are seen in cases where a person is not given due credit, or his name is removed as an author; even the position/order of the author can create major discrepancies.^[5]

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) or Vancouver group provides the four criteria for being an author of an article.^[6] ICMJE guidelines do provide the criteria for only one aspect of being an author, but there is no mention of how to resolve disputes arising between authors.

- Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work or the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of data for the work; AND
- Drafting the work or reviewing it critically for important intellectual content AND
- Final approval of the version to be published AND
- 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.

All individuals who meet the criterion must be provided the chance to participate in the review, drafting and final approval of the manuscript' along with being accountable for the work.^[6] Those who have contributed to the research study but do not fulfil all the above four criteria should be acknowledged.^[6]

Taking ICMJE guidelines into account, categorising an author and others as coauthors depends on the one who has intellectually contributed to the article and this should not be mistaken for the order to be decided as per the professional designation held by authors in an organisation.^[7] Order of coauthors is decided as per the relative contributions by them and the last place can be given to the supervising senior, who becomes a senior author.^[3]

The research conducted in the biomedical field includes discoveries and inventions that ultimately benefit the patients. The highest rank is given to the author, who is the originator of the idea of the research, and they must be given the first place as the author in comparison to the other coauthors.^[7] Usually, the list of authors and their responsibilities are communicated to them at the start of the research study verbally or through a written agreement form.^[7]

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

The author making communications with the editor of a journal for submission of the manuscript and doing other related work is a corresponding author.^[3] He has contributed to the article and does the administrative work also.^[3] While preparing to write an article, a corresponding author must be decided in the beginning by all the authors, and their contact details must remain the same even in future for reference purpose.^[8] He/she must provide details of all authors, ethical committee approval certificate, and clinical trial registration; respond to the queries sent by the reviewer during the process of peer review; share details on conflicts of interest; ^[3] additional information needed by the editor and answer queries even post-publication.^[9] In case any reader wants to seek an explanation about their work, the corresponding author is contacted, who needs to address the situation accordingly.^[9]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT SECTION

People who have helped in acquiring funds for the research, administrative work, proofreading, language translation and technical assistance must be considered under this section. In case the patients are involved in a study, they must be acknowledged in the publication as a group.^[6] Many journals require authors to add in detail the contribution of each author individually under the heading 'Contribution of the Authors' as a mandatory statement while submitting the article.^[7] 'Contributors can be acknowledged individually or under different headings (e.g. 'Clinical Investigators' or 'Participating Investigators'). Their contributions should be specified, for example, 'served as scientific advisors', 'critically reviewed the study proposal', 'collected data', 'provided and cared for study patients', 'participated in writing or technical editing of the manuscript'.^[6] In case all the authors have equally contributed, then an alphabetical arrangement of authors must be followed.^[10] It must be ensured that contributors have given their consent for the inclusion of their names, as listing them without their agreement is highly unethical.^[11]

MISREPRESENTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

Authorship allocation is a difficult task and must be done very cautiously with ethical and moral considerations. During the selection of writers as authors and coauthors, many a time conflicts do arise^[10] due to multi-authored publications. It has been observed that more than 1.5 million papers are now published every year in the biomedical and life sciences field^[12], but there are no guidelines about the limit of the number of authors to be added to an article.^[13] A single research article of 33 pages written for the subject of Physics on the Higgs boson particle has set a world record with as many as 5154 authors. The authors' contribution and their institutions are mentioned in 24 pages, and the rest is the article itself.^[14]

Different contributing factors for the Increase in the Average Number of Authors/Publications include the employees of an institution who are under pressure to improve their performances as they are being evaluated for salary hikes, promotions, increased tenure, fame, recognition status, etc. With the increase in institutional publications by the employees for improving company ranking, funds can be generated for the different research undertaken by an institute.^[15]

THE COUNCIL OF SCIENTIFIC EDITORS DESCRIBES VARIOUS INAPPROPRIATE AUTHORSHIPS

- a. Sometimes, a person is termed an honorary author even though they have not contributed largely to a research project. The famous case of John Darsee in the year 1980 at Emory and Harvard Universities, where many papers were retracted because the Heads of the Departments were given the status of coauthors. They have not contributed to the articles and knew very little of the work but they had agreed that their names could be used.^[16] Another interesting case describes a British gynaecologist, Malcolm Pearce, who published articles on work in the British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, but this work had never been undertaken. Malcolm's name was removed from the medical register for fraud.^[16]
- b. Gift authors:^[11,17] Usually, a junior adds the name of a senior person (such as Head of the department, Director and Dean) as an author, or sometimes it is even expected by the seniors to include their names even though in reality the senior has not contributed to the research study and not even in drafting, writing of the article. They do not fulfil the ICMJE criteria for authorship either. This is done with the intention that favour will be returned by the senior colleague for another research writing that will help the junior to increase their publication list.
- c. Guest authors: The name of a person of high repute is added as an author to the list of authors of a research article^[17]. This gesture will help boost the credibility and value of the article even though that person has not contributed anything to the paper. Here, both the influential person as well as the novice author are benefitted as the influential person will have one more article added to their publications and the latter will have the advantage of favourable review and easy publication.
- d. Ghost authors:^[18] Such authors are usually considered the opposite of the honorary authors who have contributed to the research study and manuscript writing but are not included as authors. They prepare the draft of the article but the companies list only the reputed scientists as authors to increase the integrity and reliability of the paper so that the paper gets accepted and published. Many times, these are usually professional writers who are paid by the companies.^[8]

The pharmaceutical world, in some circumstances, indulges in ghost authorship whereby companies hire writers who will develop a positive framework for the article about the drug.^[11] However, in article writing, the renowned scientists are, in fact, made, the authors, making the world believe that originally, the discovery was done by the scientists, and this will be beneficial for the company.^[11]

Even in the homoeopathic field, as regards government jobs, especially in academic institutions, original publications are required to be submitted by the candidates, which are given due weightage during selection. While rating homoeopathic colleges, scoring is done based on the publications of the faculty members. The total number of research paper publications by faculty members with institutional affiliation in indexed journals is quantitatively assessed. Even cumulative citation scores of research papers published by faculty members are assessed.

Many homoeopathic colleges all over India have been undertaking research funded by government agencies. Undergraduate and postgraduate students are getting scholarships to conduct research projects under schemes sponsored by the Central Council for Research in Homoeopathy. Finally, they get their research outcomes published in reputed journals and get awarded. These help the students to make their biodata impressive for their future job prospects.

SOLUTIONS TO DEAL WITH AUTHORSHIP ISSUES

In the scientific world, it is the authors who should take public responsibility for their article along with its content, so they should not indulge in unethical means to get credit. As authors deal with controversies regarding authorship issues, authors themselves must try to find solutions, but as there are collaborative studies and even people of different designations write articles, it is not easy to come to a conclusion. Journal editors often must provide solutions through the strict policies that authors have to follow.

AUTHORSHIP INDEX

Following ICMJE guidelines for the selection of authors is a better choice to solve the problem of authorship. However, there is difficulty in assessing the contribution of an author in an article, so an authorship index has been devised that calculates an individual author's overall contribution to scientific writing.^[19]

$$AI = \frac{FA+CA+1/2 OP}{n} \times 100$$

- AI = Authorship index
- FA = Number of times the person has been the first author
- CA = Number of times the person has been the corresponding author
- OP = Number of times the person has been an author at any other position
- n = Total number of publications of the author under consideration.

Note: If the author is both the first author and corresponding author for any publication, they are counted only once (either as FA or CA), not both.

A person at any other position in the author sequence gets ½ point. An author can have a maximum of 100 if he is the first author or corresponding author in all his articles, mentioning that he is very involved and active in writing. If an author is neither the first author nor the corresponding author, he will score 50. Hence, the scores lie between 50 and 100. If more is the score, it means the author is active, and if the score is less, it means the author has not significantly contributed toward writing.^[19]

If an author has 30 publications, 20 as first author, 5 as corresponding author, 5 in other positions, the Authorship Index= 91.6.

An authorship index is a tool for an author that can be used by the researchers for marking the score, and it provides the overall impact of the author's scholarly output and performance. Anyone can use the index to calculate a particular writer's score. The tool has its importance in cases of job interviews where publications are nowadays a criterion for recruitment in research organisations and colleges. Candidates are required to furnish the citation status of their publication along with the impact factors of the journals with the H index. The ability and expertise of the candidate toward scientific writing can be deciphered through the calculated score.

H-index reflects the number of published papers and the number of times the author is cited.^[20] In case the H- index is 7, it means that the author has published at least seven papers and that each has received at least seven citations. This tool is useful in providing grants for research projects and even in recruitment for academic posts.^[20]

Under standards like CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy), contributions from authors for the published work are taken so that they get recognised and this helps in reducing authorship disputes.^[21]

Open Researcher and Contributor Identifiers are important for a researcher as they help in distinguishing from other researchers. The researcher can register, own and control their record through this number, which is freely available as a unique and persistent identifier to them. It helps individuals to get connected to their work across disciplines and at different periods.^[22]

The ICMJE guidelines must be followed to highlight the order and need to be decided by the author group. This cannot be done by an editor of a journal.^[9] However, if any author is not included or is removed or added, the editor must be informed, and he must seek an explanation in this regard and get a signed statement for the request for change.^[9] The sequence chosen by the author and coauthors for placing their names must be explained by them in case they are asked about it.^[10] In some cases, the position occupied by the last author is an important place as it is for a senior person of the organisation who guides and supervises the whole work.^[8]

The responsibilities and work to be done by each person, along with the period of finishing the work must be designated well in advance of the starting of the research and the article writing.^[7] During the process of writing the article, if any new development occurs, all authors must be informed, and they must review it.^[8]

The students undertaking research studies at their Master's and Ph.D levels are supposed to publish their findings in reputed journals.^[7] Here, the student should be the first author, not their guide/mentor/supervisor.^[7] As mentioned in Colombian law, the sole and exclusive author of the work is the person who organised, collected, expressed, recompiled and formulated in writing his or her ideas, including guidelines and ideas presented by the supervisor in that work'.^[7]

The contributor section in journals is a significant portion that describes the work done by each author and will reduce the chances of favouritism.^[7] The seminars related to authorship policies must be organised by the institutes. Authorship guidelines must be explained in detail to discourage dishonest practices and ghost authorship.^[2] A policy related to this must also be included in 'Instructions to authors', which will be followed by the authors during the submission of the article.^[2] The policy presented in every journal must be stated in clear and explicit terms.^[11] In case of disputes, the organisation where writers work must take responsibility and manage to settle affairs among all authors.^[9] For conflicts of interest, disclosure forms must be filled by the authors.^[2,8] Authors need to highlight their relationship and activities to prevent bias, along with the source of support of work and their role in the publication.^[9]

In the case where the journal editor can identify a guest author in an article, a notice must be issued to them.^[2] The institutes are undertaking research and receiving funds from governmental organisations, if they indulge in getting work done from the ghost authors, funds must be cancelled to curb the malpractice.^[2]

'In India, the right of authorship is derived from The Indian Copyright Act, 1957. The Act provides for copyright protection to an original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work. The word literary defined in section 2(o) of the Act means a dissertation'.^[23] Section 2(z) relates to work of joint authorship.^[23] Section 57 of copyright deals with rights in authorship, whereby the author can claim authorship and can restrain or claim damages if the work is distorted, modified and affects their honour or reputation.^[23]

If misconduct is noticed, retraction of the article can be done by the editor, or they can impose a ban on the author for some time. Judicial procedures can be followed through case filing in a Court of Justice. An injunction (restrain from further violation and seize the issues) or damages can be claimed as monetary compensation or both.^[23] Punishments in the form of monetary fines can be provided under Section 63 for infringement of copyright related to the severity of the violation.^[23]

CONCLUSION

Writing an article explores an author's creativity and originality. Authorship rules must deal with ethics as it benefits the person of their creativity. Seminars and conferences must be organised for students, faculty members and researchers that help create awareness about the publication process. All authors must check the final version of the article with names and order of authors so that ghostwriters can be removed. Many disputes among writers occur due to miscommunication, so regular meetings and recording of all important points in writing for future reference must be conducted to resolve issues. Legal aspects can be explored by the authors in cases of unethical scientific writing and publication under The Indian Copyright Act 1957. Research and academic institutes must prepare policies for authorship, as publication is based on trust and professional integrity. Indulgence in the practices will amount to punishments, denying promotions in the job, no increase in salary and even denying research funds to the institute. Journal editors need to make robust strategies to resolve issues related to authorship. To preserve the sanctity of publication, the practice of maintaining authorship criteria must be followed by all authors.

Ethical approval

The Institutional Review Board approval is not required.

Declaration of patient consent

Patient consent not required as there are no patients in this study.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

Use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for manuscript preparation

The authors confirm that there was no use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for assisting in the writing or editing of the manuscript, and no images were manipulated using AI.

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