

Ethical Issues in Biomedical Research: A Never Ending Debate of Authorship Criteria

Yogesh Kumar S.

Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, J.N. Medical College, KLE University, Belgaum-590010, Karnataka, India.

Publishing an article in a peer-reviewed journal is a matter of pride to many young, budding researchers in the biomedical field. According to the guidelines of Medical Council of India (MCI), publications in the peer-reviewed journals are one of the criteria for considering a candidate for promotion and academic excellence.[1] Authorship is also related to hiring an individual to a particular job, creation of status, providing grants, scholarships and awards.[2] As more and more doctors are recruited in medical colleges as faculty members, publishing research articles has become more of a compulsion than actually contributing to the scientific research. More worrying is the fact that, some of the so called "AUTHORS" can go to any extent to "HAVE THEIR NAME" in a published article. The matter has to be taken very seriously because including the name of a candidate who has not contributed to the research may boost their career when they actually don't deserve it. Similarly, omitting a potential author from the publication may result in a detrimental effect on his/her career prospects.[2]

In the hot pursuit of getting the publications through unethical practices, some of the real, good, well organized studies will be lost in transition. There is an immediate need to check these developments as many such potential false authors may continue their work, thus diluting the research of some deserving

professionals. Some of the unethical authorship practices are as follows:

1. Getting an Honorary authorship by the Head of the Departments without contributing in any way during the study or during the preparation of the manuscript.
2. Being in good terms with a potential researcher (sometimes from other departments and other Institutes as well!) and utilizing this closeness to be a part of the publication.
3. Including the name of the spouse in the publication as this will have a double benefit if the spouse is from the same field.
4. As a part of the departmental policy to include some of the names in the publication so that all of them are benefited from the research.
5. Including the names of faculty from the present Institute where the first author is working and thus failing to give credit to the actual place of research and faculty who are the main people behind the study.
6. Research has shown that in major papers where there are five or more authors, the first two authors contribute to majority of the work. Other coauthors had contributed only the cases for the study or generated a sense of fear or obligation in the mind of the first author.[3]
7. The personal grudge may itself contribute to the omission of the potential author's name from the publication.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Yogesh Kumar S., Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, J.N. Medical College, KLE University, Belgaum-590010, Karnataka, India.

E-mail: yogeshkumar23@gmail.com

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8. Failure to acknowledge a potential researcher if he/she has left the Institute after taking part in the research.
9. Getting a manuscript written by professionals who can actually WRITE a research paper with SOME data.
10. Failure of the potential contributors of a research study to raise voice against the unethical publication practices can also be considered an unethical silence!

Such unethical practices have become an open secret, with everyone talking about it, doing nothing! According to International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE 2010), authorship credit should be based on

1. Substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data;
2. Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and 3. Final approval of the version to be published.[4] But in reality, how many authors follow these guidelines is a highly debatable issue.

Some of the remedial measures that can be considered to control this menace are as follows,

1. Introducing the undergraduate students and interns to research methodologies (stressing upon ethical aspect of research in particular!) and encouraging them to read journals.
2. Due emphasis should be given to dissertation which is a research study during the post graduation. Post graduates should be made to publish their research work and it should be considered for qualifying for their exams. It goes a long way because, these postgraduates, once they become junior faculty will be in a better position to write research papers. It is a well known fact that, most of the residents and junior faculty working in medical colleges are not trained well to write scientific articles.[5]
3. There should be some strict monitoring system by the Journals themselves other than just accepting the "Contributors'

Form".

4. Journals can also specify the number of authors in different types of publications.
5. Restricting the number of research publications by an author per year will also help in curbing the unethical authorship.
6. Multicentre studies should clearly mention the type of contributions from each and every author.
7. Setting up of "Article Review Committee" other than "Institutional Review Board" in each institute which monitors all the articles written by the faculty members before being sent to the journal.
8. There has to be sort of punishment to the so called Ghost Authors in the form of not accepting their articles for a specified time period or blacklisting them.
9. Instituting so called "Good Publication Practices" in the lines of "Good Clinical Practices (GCPs)" and "Good Laboratory Practices (GLPs)."

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