Problems of Editors with Authorship in Small Medical Journals

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A recent survey of editors of journals from different scientific fields showed that editors reported a 30% prevalence of authorship problems in their journals, but did not consider authorship problems to be serious and were confident in their management of authorship problems. The same editors also admitted that there was an increasing trend of ghost authorship, but again perceived it as a small problem in their work. This contrasts the reports from institutions, such as Harvard Medical School in the USA, that authorship disputes are an increasing problem for the ombuds office. Many scientific organizations or institutions do not have clear authorship policies, and a recent study from Australia showed that, even when there are national authorship policies, the universities do not fully comply with them. Another recent study from the USA showed that only 20% of academic medical centers had policies that explicitly banned ghost-writing. A study by Mitcheson, et al, published in this issue of The IJOEM, also shows that authorship problems are an important and serious problem in an academic community in New Zealand.

All the above studies have been performed in the economically developed countries, which belong to the mainstream scientific community. Is the situation the same in smaller scientific communities, which belong to the so-called “scientific periphery”? Studies from research institutions from South Africa and Bangladesh show that authorship is a serious problem in these scientific community. A study of medical journal editors in Iran showed that many editors were not familiar with the standard authorship criteria in biomedicine. We showed that in our small medical scientific community in Croatia, up to 60% of authors did not satisfy the full set of standard authorship criteria set by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE).

Stating that authorship would be a serious problem in small academic communities is not surprising, as it is probably an even more valuable currency for research and academic promotion in communities with lower publishing and research potential. However, our finding that only about 40% of authors of the Croatian Medical Journal (CMJ) really deserved the authorship was truly surprising, prompting us to start thinking about what editors can do about authorship. Editors are certainly not a policing force, but are responsible for the public record of research in their journals. Although ICMJE authorship criteria suggest that journals should publish authors’ contributions in the journal, this was problematic for us because it was obvious that many authors did not qualify for ICMJE authorship. Our journal is a member journal of the ICMJE, and we felt frustrated that we could not act when we found gross abuse of authorship. We decided to postpone printing the declaration of authorship in the CMJ until we knew more about the reasons why authors do not adequately declare their contribution. We did a series of research studies, re-
ently reviewed in an article on the history of ICMJE authorship definitions. As authorship declaration forms that authors fill out and send to journals are self-reports, we were interested in their psychometric characteristics. We first explored the relationship between the form of authorship declaration and prevalence of undeserved authorship according to ICMJE criteria in major medical journals—JAMA, BMJ and Annals of Internal Medicine. We showed that journals with open-ended questions or contribution lists had much more undeserving authors than journals with instructive declaration formats, telling the respondent how many contributions are needed to satisfy the ICMJE authorship criteria. We confirmed this finding of a causal relationship between the structure of the contribution disclosure form and the likelihood that authors met ICMJE criteria for authorship in our own journal, using a randomized study design, confirming that the cognitive task of mapping the answer to the response format influences the answers on the forms and, consequently, the attribution of authorship. We also assessed the reliability of contribution declaration forms, i.e., if these forms were dependable, stable and consistent when administered to the same people on different occasions. When the same corresponding authors were asked about their contributions to the same manuscript at two different time points, more than two-thirds differed in at least one contribution choice between the two disclosure statements. This clearly showed that contribution declaration forms are not reliable as a way of assessing authorship. We did another randomized study to test if contribution declaration forms should have binary (yes/no) choices or rather a range of contributions, from none to full. When authors could choose the extent of their contribution on a scale from ‘0’ (none) to ‘4’ (full), they reported more contributions eligible to meet ICMJE authorship criteria than those who were offered only a binary declaration format. Finally, in a recent study of opinions of authors about the value of their own contributions and that of other authors, we showed that authors who declared contribution to a specific category rated it as more important for authorship than those authors who did not contribute to the same category. This indicates that authorship may not be a normative issue subjective to categorization into criteria, but also a very personal view of the importance and value of one’s contributions.

Based on these studies, which showed that the existing practice of authorship contribution disclosure is not the best format for making judgments on authorship, we decided to ask each manuscript author a single open-ended question: “Why do you think you deserve to be the author of this manuscript?” The CMJ now publishes authors’ answers to this question without editing, except for minor language corrections. We feel that this is fair, both to the journals and to the authors; authors do not feel obliged to “fit” themselves into the ICMJE criteria and editors recognize that the issue of authorship is indeed more than a normative issue. This practice may also be the best way for small journals and small scientific communities; it ensures the transparency of authorship and public responsibility of researchers towards their work and recognizes the complexity of authorship.

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Authorship in Small Journals

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