

Undeserved Authorships Problems in Scholarly Publications

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Criteria for authorship

An author is “the person who originated or gave existence to anything” and whose authorship determines responsibility for what was created.¹ In a scientific paper, authorship is an important form of academic currency and this importance, changing the nature of biomedical research over the last few decades, has stimulated an increase of multi-author in the manuscripts.² The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)/ Vancouver Group defines, “the authorship confers credit and has important academic, social, and financial implications. Authorship also implies responsibility and accountability for published work”. The ICMJE recommends that the authorship based on the following four criteria includes,

- “Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work”
- “Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content”
- “Final approval of the version to be published”
- “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.”³

These criteria for authorship help to reduce the number of “undeserved authorships” including gift authorship, pressured authorship, and honorary authorship.^{2,4,5} Another type of misconduct is ‘ghost authorship (failure to include the person as an author when they have contributed substantially)’ which is the opposite of honorary authorship.⁶ The description of different types of authorship is summarized in Table – 1.

Gift authorship

Gift authorship is defined as “co-authorship awarded to a person who has not contributed significantly to the study”.⁷ Gifting authorship to the person who does not qualify for authorship is unethical.⁸ In the last few years, giving gift authorship is widely prevalent in many institutions.⁷

Table 1: Types of authorships.

Types of authorships	Description
Gift authorship	When authorship is granted as a favour
Pressured authorship	When a person uses their position of authority to get authorship
Honorary authorship/ Guest authorship	Granting authorship to those who played no significant role in the work, for a variety of reasons
Ghost authorship	The failure to include the name of the person as an author when they have contributed substantially to the research work or drafting the manuscript

Pressured authorship

Pressured authorship is a variation of guest authorship.⁹ This occurs when the names of persons/ individuals are included in all research work by members of their research team.¹⁰

Honorary authorship/ Guest authorship

The honorary/ guest authorships are preventable if the researchers not including any researcher in their manuscript when they are not meeting the ICMJE authorship criteria. The prevalence of honorary authorship is between 19% and 60%.¹¹ Mirzazadeh *et al.*, studied the prevalence of honorary and ghost authorship in biomedical journals and found that ~89% of articles had at least one honorary author, in that ~20% of the article has more than 3 honorary authors.¹² In another study, Mowatt *et al.*, analyzed 362 reviews and found that 39% of reviews had evidence of honorary authors and 9% of reviews had evidence of ghost authors.¹³ Mowatt *et al.*, also stated that the honorary authorship is more prevalent than ghost authorship because the honorary authors are not participated in drafting the reviews or not approved it for submission.¹³ In recent years, the authors are forming the “publication cartels” to increase the number of publications which leads to an increase in the percentage of voluntary honorary authorship.¹⁴

Ghost Authorship

The failure to include the name the person as an author when they have contributed substantially to an article may result in a lack of accountability. Gøtzsche *et al.*, conducted a cohort study to compare the 44 study protocols and corresponding publications for industry-initiated trials approved by the ethical committees for Copenhagen and Frederiksberg in 1994–1995 and found evidence of ghost authorship for 33 trials (75%) with the prevalence rate of 91% (40 of 44 articles).¹⁵ Bavdekar, highlighted three types of ghost authorship *viz.* (a) suppression of the contribution of a junior colleague (junior researcher, postgraduate students or postdoctoral fellow), (b) omission of the researcher in author list and (c) Manuscript writing services where the medical writer appointed by a pharmaceutical/ biomedical industries and the drafted manuscript is published with the authorship of the reputed scientist.¹⁶

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Ghostwriting was once the “dirty little secret” of the biomedical literature have used to market sertraline, olanzapine, gabapentin, estrogen replacement therapy, rofecoxib, paroxetine, methylphenidate, milnacipran, venlafaxine, and dexfenfluramine.¹⁷ The risk with ghost-written manuscripts is that the listed author may not read the manuscript or may not know the content published under his name.¹⁶ Generally, the ghost authors are work on behalf of companies, or agents with a commercial interest in the topic, and this compounds the problem. Hence, the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) considers the phenomenon of ghostwriting as dishonest and unacceptable.¹⁸

Recommendations

Adherence to ICMJE criteria for authorship will reduce the undeserved authorships. The authors of the Journal of Young Pharmacists requested to adhering the ICMJE guidance on “Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals” which help the authors to reduce the manuscript processing time and rate of manuscript rejection.¹⁸⁻²⁰

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