



End the farce; a new approach to authorship

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Authors and peer reviewers are the engine room of any scientific journal; rarely paid and inadequately acknowledged background stars except in the case of spectacular success or equally spectacular misconduct. Authors see their cherished articles disappear into the black box of a journal's peer review system, awaiting an outcome that is usually unpredictable and generally unsatisfactory. In return, journals impose a tyrannical regime upon authors. Constructive comments are rare; words of encouragement even rarer. Publication is offered with tortuous and labour-intensive caveats; rejection delivered with standard words devoid of sympathy.

All this assumes, of course, that you qualify as an author. The tyranny of journals extends to ascribing authorship. Is it enough to have a genius idea that others research and translate into understandable prose? Is it enough to collect the data for a research study and leave the ideas and interpretation to others? What about writing or revising the article itself, is that sufficient to merit co-authorship? In the self-referential world of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), only a substantial contribution to each stage of an article's life cycle from conception and data collection, though drafting, to final approval qualifies you as an author.¹ Where the cartel of the ICMJE leads, everybody else tends to follow.

Yet the authorship guidelines proposed by the ICMJE are unworkable. Last year, I ran a workshop on authorship issues at a prolific research institution. Most people in the audience of around forty people had authored medical journal articles, the majority of them several times over. I asked if any of them had ever met the authorship criteria of ICMJE, the guidance that all medical journals defer to. Only two people raised their hands. Indeed, the problems with the ICMJE authorship guidance have been confirmed again and again by empirical research and by anecdotal evidence.

Part of the problem is academia, which seeks an easy option, just as it does with impact factors, to measure academic output. But should the difficulties faced by academia in distinguishing the work rate of its employees become a burden for scientific journals?

An important role of journals is to promote transparency, which is why several journals have now adopted a system of contributorship that records precisely the work of everybody involved with a manuscript. In addition, a guarantor system identifies an individual who will take public responsibility for the integrity of the work.²

When authorship disputes occur, journals are usually left to resolve a contentious argument; a role that most journals are undertrained and under-resourced to attempt. Guidance offered by Committee of Publication Ethics (COPE) and World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) helps, but editors and publishers are left to liaise with employers and academic institutions, usually unsatisfactorily. Many authorship disagreements arise because of the ICMJE guidance. What value, then, in authorship policies that create problems rather than solve them?

To my mind, the current ICMJE guidance is a farce and, if my straw poll is any measure, the guidance is flouted routinely. Most authors of articles do not meet the ICMJE guidance, and the majority of journal articles could be deemed fraudulent on that basis. A better solution would be to open up authorship. Instead of insisting on each author's involvement on every aspect of writing up a research study, why not include as an author each person who has contributed to any — instead of all — of the items listed by the ICMJE? Next, each author's role would need to be clearly stated in a contributorship statement. Finally, and importantly, each author would need to be willing to take public responsibility for the integrity of the research and the article.

This might seem a radical change, but it is a logical one — and it is one JRSM is seeking to introduce. Your views are welcome. Authorship is currently a sham; it needs to become an honest statement of credit.

References

- 1 See http://www.icmje.org/ethical_1author.html (last accessed 30 August 2012)
- 2 Wager L. Bye bye by-line, hello contributors. *J R Soc Med* 2006;99:542. See <http://jrsm.rsmjournals.com/content/99/11/542> (last accessed 30 August 2012)