

Editorial



Unjustified Authorship Should Not Be Tolerated

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Sung-Tae Hong , Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Korean Medical Science*

On 14 November, Zastrow¹ published a news article in *Nature* exposing Korean academics who listed their kids as scientific co-authors. The article summarized the Ministry of Education data and pointed to unjustified co-authorship of Korean children in 794 publications. Notably, 17 professors representing 11 universities were accused of the co-authorship with their children.

Over the past 3 months, thousands of news reports have commented on the issue of unjustified authorship in Korean scholarly publications. Most of the reports have focused on the article that appeared in the *Journal of Pathology and Translational Medicine (JPTM)* in 2009 (DOI: 10.4132/KoreanJPathol.2009.43.4.306). The first author of the index article was a high-school student, daughter of Mr. Kuk Cho, who was a candidate for the post of the Minister of Justice. Mr. Cho took the post despite the accusations of his daughter's unethical behavior, but he resigned 35 days later; his daughter's authorship issue played its sinister role. Eventually, Mr. Cho resumed his previous job as professor at the Seoul National University School of Law.

The corresponding author of the *JPTM* article, a pediatrics professor at a private university, confessed that the first author played an insignificant role in research and writing, which was confirmed by other co-authors. The fact that the high-school girl was the first author of a medical article called serious concerns on potential breach of research ethics in Korea.

Listing honorary or courtesy (guest, gift, and coercive) authors in Korean scholarly articles is believed to be a common practice.^{2,3} A researcher can ask a question for the *JPTM* authorship scandal—why the daughter of Professor Cho was the first author? The first place in the author bylines is usually for those with substantive scholarly contributions. The first position is quite exceptional for a gift author. The answer was the favor exchange for the children of the two father professors; Professor Cho and the corresponding author. The son of the corresponding author and the daughter of Professor Cho were classmates of a high-school in 2008. The son joined an internship program at the School of Law, where Professor Cho influenced, and Cho's daughter participated the research work of the corresponding author. The son received a document for perfunctory contribution and used it for his specification during the university application. Of course the daughter used her first authorship publication in *JPTM* for university entrance. Professor Cho and the corresponding author of *JPTM* abused their privileged power and exchanged favors of specification building of their high-school children to ensure their university admission.

The index article at *JPTM* was retracted after the thorough editorial review.⁴ The issue resolved easily thanks to the rapid retraction; the authorship of the first author was apparently unjustified and the Institutional Review Board approval was faked. The Korean Academy of Medical Sciences and the National Academy of Medicine Korea officially supported the *JPTM* editorial decision to retract the article. Although the journal corrected its mistake and acted rapidly, the corresponding author's university has not yet voiced a concern and has not qualified behavior of its faculty member as misconduct. The delayed or even no response of the university may convey a wrong message to the public, destroying the trust in the fairness and ethics of academia. Rapid and appropriate response to any misconduct is a responsibility of the academic society.

The main issue of the current scandalous case is that unjustified authorship paved the way for the entrance to a medical school. The *Nature* news article noted that only wealthy 'elite' can commit this kind of misconduct.¹ However, the surfaced case is just the tip of the iceberg. Many Koreans suspect that there are many unnoticed cases of similar misconduct in Korea. The *JPTM* case became public during the review of the Minister of Justice candidate's profile. It could have remained unnoticed otherwise.

The scandal has raised another question as to how academic societies should organize research and writing activities of high-school students. Their early involvement in research and writing is advisable despite low chances of achieving it in reality. Most students cannot satisfy the authorship criteria, and that should be taken into consideration properly at the university admission competition.

Honorary or courtesy authorship has been common in Korea due to the tradition of Confucianism,^{2,3} but it is also reported common among surgeons in North America.⁵ Although the authorship abuse is found globally among researchers, the gift authorship to high-school children is an extreme notorious form recognized in Korea. Korean academic societies and institutions, therefore, should enforce the global norms of research ethics and consider appropriate authorship as a basis for the interaction with the global community.⁶ Writing correct byline authors is a part of research integrity. Unjustified authorship should not be tolerated.

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