

From Authorship to Contributorship: Are we prepared to say bye- bye to by-line?

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Authorship remains an important issue with most of the Journal Editors in the developed as well as developing countries. Special sessions are devoted to Authorship issues in most of the medical editors, medical writer's conferences held all over the world but so far this problem has not yet been satisfactorily resolved.

Reports from Harvard Medical School in USA state that authorship disputes are an increasing problem for the Ombudsman office there.¹ Studies from South Africa and Bangladesh also show that authorship is a very serious issue in their scientific community.^{2,3} Mitcheson reports that authorship problems are important in the academic community of New Zealand.⁴ Croatian Medical Journal found out that only 40% of their authors really deserved the authorship⁵ Hence to overcome this issue, they have started asking a question to all their authors "Why do you think you deserve to be the author of this manuscript" and their answers are published as such.⁶

In 1984 the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) came up with its guidelines on authorship which are based on the following criteria:⁷

1. Substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data.
 2. Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.
 3. Final approval of the version to be published.
- All those who meet the above three conditions are eligible to be included as Authors in the manuscript.

ICMJE criteria also suggests that journals should publish authors contributions in the journal. Even this has failed to convince many editors, hence it

remains under constant discussion some calling it the notorious ICMJE criteria.⁸

It was Drummond Rennie the Deputy Editor of JAMA in 1997 who came up with the idea of contributor-ship.⁹ Later on many other distinguished editors have joined this club which believes that mentioning contributorship of each listed author will resolve this problem to a great extent.^{10,11} Richard Smith former Editor of BMJ believes that "creating scientific paper is much more like making a film than writing a novel".¹² Participating in the discussion on authorship issue during the Committee on Publication Ethics Congress organized by Shiraz University of Medical Sciences at Shiraz in Islamic Republic of Iran in November 2011, Dr. Farrokh Habibzadeh also suggested that we should change the authorship guidelines and it should be replaced with contributorship.¹³

It is usually felt that first and second position in the by-line in authorship is very important and even the best friends will quarrel for this position. In Pakistan the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council is reported to have decided to give equal credit to the first three authors and no credit for the rest of the authors which also is not fair. Most often research is a team effort in which many people participate hence denying them any credit tantamount to injustice. "Authorship issues can be very crucial as they can hide the ethical malpractices at best and fraud at worst".⁸ Marusic A in an Editorial published in The International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine has also discussed this issue of authorship in detail.¹⁴

The situation in Pakistan is not different from other countries as regards authorship. Ever since the academic institutions and government institutions like PM&DC as well as Higher Education Commission have started giving credit for all faculty selections and further academic promotions, most of the manuscripts that medical journals receive have large number of authors. At times it is not surprising to see the authors having added the name of their friends working in different

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institutions or even in different cities though they have had no actual contribution whatsoever to the study. This issue also came under discussion at the recent Workshop/Training Course organized by Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME) in collaboration with Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (EMAME) at Karachi on July 14th 2012. Participating in the discussion Dr. Jamshed Akhtar Editor of Journal of College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan opined that it is rather surprising to find out that the name of the head of the institution i.e Vice Chancellor of the university or Principal of the medical college is added in most of the manuscripts being submitted from these institutions. After careful scrutiny, we ask them to remove the name of the head of the institution and if they do not agree, we do not accept the paper for further processing. Dr. Fatema Jawad Chief Editor of Journal of Pakistan Medical Association also expressed similar views and pointed out that they ask the authors to remove the name of the Vice Chancellor, Principal, Head of the institution if after scrutiny they feel that they have no contribution and do not deserve authorship. In case the correspondence author does not agree, the manuscript is not processed further. In Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences we face a similar situation. Often when we ask the corresponding author to reduce the number of authors, include only those who have actually made some intellectual contribution to the study as per ICMJE criteria and accommodate others in acknowledgement, we are asked, "How many authors would you allow" or "Kitney authors Chal Jaaing Gaay". It is quite difficult to make them understand and sometimes they do reduce the number of authors, do provide each individual authors contribution which many a times is not convincing. In a few cases when the name of all the faculty members in the unit were listed as authors in the study though on scrutiny it became clear that not all of them have had any contribution and they decline to reduce the number of authors, we had to refuse accepting such manuscripts for further processing but even sometimes we found it difficult. JCPSP, JPMA and Pak J Med Sci can afford to take such a stand not to accept such papers where authorship is suspicious depending on individual cases but it may not be easy for many other journals. Even otherwise the Editors are not supposed to act like Policeman. However, authorship issue needs to be tackled in such a way that it does not spoil the scientific integrity and also does not affect the journal's credibility.

More recently yet another important player has entered this game which is known as Professional Medical Writers. They prepare the manuscript on behalf of the authors and also help in making submission to the journals which some authors find quite difficult. Wager believes that involvement of professional writers should not be a problem but transparency should be ensured. This will also make sure that "Ghost writers lose their meaning spookiness if they are clearly named". These medical writers have a difficult task to perform. "They not only have to keep the sponsored author but journal editor and reviewer also happy which is not an easy task." But the fact remains that henceforth majority of the medical writing will continue to be done by professional medical writers and not physicians in most cases. Hence, the writers should get benefit from training as one cannot learn good writing so quickly which comes with experience.¹⁵

To begin with the journal editors were quite hostile to these professional writers but slowly and gradually they have come to realize their importance. The problem only arises when their contribution is not acknowledged. When the journal will start listing the contribution of all individual authors rather than just including the names of the authors, it might help to resolve this problem to some extent.¹⁵

We in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences do follow the ICMJE criteria for authorship but when we ask for the contribution of all the individual authors listed in the by-line, it does not match with the ICMJE criteria. Hence it is a dilemma and one does not know what to do? After giving it a serious thought, what we have decided is that apart from the listed authors, we also ask them to provide the individual contributions of each author and it is published as such. We leave it to the academic institutions to make their own decisions as regards giving the respective authors credit for their further academic promotions. Adding this contributorship is also not perfect just like the ICMJE authorship criteria but it can certainly help in resolving some of the issues. Farrokh Habibzadeh and Harvey Marcovitch believe that "time for the old authorship criteria is up, and it is now time for the contributorship scheme".⁸ The situation may be a bit different in different countries and they have to find a local solution to this problem till such time that the scientific writers community comes to some consensus agreement.

In Pakistan, we believe we need to have a multidimensional approach. First we must keep

on making noise at all available forums to make the institution heads realize that they should desist from asking their faculty members to include their name as one of the authors, creating such awareness will definitely have some impact. Secondly apart from the listed authors, asks for individual author's contribution as well which should be published along with the manuscript. Thirdly the authors are also encouraged to acknowledge the professional help if they have received in the final preparation of the manuscript. Finally, if after initial scrutiny, there is a strong suspicion that all the listed authors do not deserve authorship, the issue should be taken up with the correspondence author. If they agree to reduce the number of authors, well and good; otherwise the editors should not hesitate to refuse accepting such manuscripts for further processing and peer review. This issue of authorship is quite serious one and may not be resolved easily. However, at present, we in Pakistan do not seem to be prepared to say bye-bye to by-line.

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