

Awful authorship:

the role of institutions in preventing and resolving authorship disputes

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Why 'Awful Authorship'?

- Authorship disputes are often nasty
- They have been with us for ever ...



What is the role of institutions?

- Educate
- Promote good practice
- ?Reward good practice / ensure reward systems do not encourage misconduct
- Resolve disputes
- Discipline misconduct



So what's the problem?

- Authorship conventions vary with discipline
- There are no universal rules
(cf plagiarism, data fabrication)
- Even within disciplines, guidelines require interpretation, and much is unwritten ...



For example:
Authorship of scientific
research is not straightforward!



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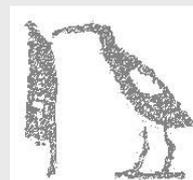
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The ATLAS Experiment at the CERN Large Hadron Collider

OPEN ACCESS THE CERN LARGE HADRON COLLIDER: ACCELERATOR AND EXPERIMENTS

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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An International Randomized Trial Comparing Four Thrombolytic Strategies for Acute Myocardial Infarction

The GUSTO Investigators

N Engl J Med 1993; 329:673-682 | [September 2, 1993](#)

The GUSTO study

- 1081 hospitals in 15 countries
- 41,021 patients
- 972 authors



Many people don't know / disagree with ICMJE criteria

Of 66 UK researchers
(univ med faculty)

- 51% unaware of any explicit criteria
- 62% disagreed that all 3 criteria should be met

Bhopal et al *BMJ* 1997;**314**:1009-12



Many people don't know / disagree with ICMJE criteria

Of 39 French researchers (PIs)

- 49% unaware of ICMJE authorship criteria
- 77% disagreed that all 3 criteria should be met
- 41% had been left off articles
- 62% had learnt they were an author after publication

Pignatelli et al *JME* 2005;31:578-81



Order of author listing remains problematic

- Important in academic reward systems
- Virtually no written guidelines
- Lots of conventions / practices



Harvard policy

- *“Many different ways of determining order of authorship exist across disciplines, research groups, and countries. Examples of authorship policies include descending order of contribution, placing the person who took the lead in writing the manuscript or doing the research first and the most experienced contributor last, and alphabetical or random order. **While the significance of a particular order may be understood in a given setting, order of authorship has no generally agreed upon meaning.**”*
- *As a result, it is not possible to interpret from order of authorship the respective contributions of individual authors. Promotion committees, granting agencies, readers, and others who seek to understand how individual authors have contributed to the work should not read into order of authorship their own meaning, which may not be shared by the authors themselves.”*

<http://hms.harvard.edu/about-hms/integrity-academic-medicine/hms-policy/faculty-policies-integrity-science/authorship-guidelines>



REF

- “The main panel understands that there are a variety of publication practices ... in relation to author order”
- Whether 1st, last, alphabetical or some other order, “Panel A considers that the lead and corresponding authors should be easily identifiable”
- The role of lead author may be shared.
- Provided the staff member is “clearly identifiable” as lead or corresponding author, no additional info is needed



It's worse in other countries ...

- European 'habilitation' requirements for doctors (usually count 1st author only)
- Indian Medical Research Council (only count 1st and 2nd author)
- May use complex equations depending on order and number of authors



65% of Indian doctors are aware of gift authorship

THE TIMES OF INDIA Chennai

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Want to bribe a doctor? Gift authorship of medical papers

Pushpa Narayan, TNN | Apr 26, 2014, 12:37 AM IST

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✉ 📄 🖨️ A A



CHENNAI: Some doctors have always had friends who showered gifts for prescribing medicines or treatment. The unethical practice has taken a much more dangerous turn: doctors are now getting authorship of studies in internationally peer reviewed journals as gifts.

Publishing papers in international journals means higher professional standing, a declaration of professional ability and

Times of India
26th April 2014



What can institutions do about the reward system?

- Influence over funders?
- Influence over REF?
- Policies on appointments



Unintended effects of reward systems

- Authorship disputes
- Authorship abuse:
 - Guest authorship
 - Ghost authorship
- Redundant (salami) publication



What is the role of institutions?

- Educate
- Promote good practice
- ?Reward good practice / ensure reward systems do not encourage misconduct
- **Resolve disputes**
- Discipline misconduct



ICMJE

(Int Cttee of Medical Journal Editors)

- “it is not the role of journal editors to determine who qualifies or does not qualify for authorship or to arbitrate authorship conflicts”
- “If agreement cannot be reached ... the **institution**(s) where the work was performed, not the journal editor, should be asked to investigate”



COPE

(www.publicationethics.org)

- **“institutions** should respond to journals if they request information about issues, such as disputed authorship”
- **“institutions** should have policies supporting research integrity and good practice (e.g. for authorship)”



Cooperation between research institutions and journals on research integrity cases: guidance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)

Summary

Institutions and journals both have important duties relating to research and publication misconduct. Institutions are responsible for the conduct of their researchers and for encouraging a healthy research environment. Journals are responsible for the conduct of their editors, for safeguarding the research record, and for ensuring the reliability of everything they publish. It is therefore important for institutions and journals to communicate and collaborate effectively on cases relating to research integrity. To achieve this, we make the following recommendations.

Institutions should:

- have a research integrity officer (or office) and publish their contact details prominently;
- inform journals about cases of proven misconduct that affect the reliability or attribution of work that they have published.

“To do” list ...

- Training for supervisors / mentors
- Educational material on authorship (by discipline)
- Authorship policies??
- Dispute resolution mechanism
- Misconduct investigation mechanism



Scenario 1

- A prestigious journal is about to accept an article for publication. This journal requires signatures of all authors (for copyright transfer) and from individuals mentioned in the Acknowledgements. However, one person mentioned in the Acknowledgements (Dr B) refuses to sign because he says he should be an author. The corresponding author insists that Dr B didn't contribute enough to the project to warrant authorship and that he has only insisted on being an author after the article was accepted by the high impact journal and that he is simply trying to delay publication out of spite. The journal puts the manuscript on hold and will not proceed to publication until this is sorted out. The editor refers the matter to the university where all the authors (and Dr B) work asking for a swift response, as they have scheduled publication in the next issue.



Scenario 2

- A journal editor receives a letter from Dr T saying that she should have been included as an author on a recent publication. The article describes research sponsored by a commercial company and the listed authors include employees from the sponsoring company and academics from a university. The editor refers the dispute to the university where Dr T works.
- How should the university handle this?



Scenario 3

- A journal editor notices that an author (Dr M) has been removed from an article when a revised version is returned to the journal (with the authors' responses to the peer reviewers' comments). The editor queries this with the corresponding author (Dr S) and explains that the journal requires written confirmation that all authors agree to the change. It transpires that Dr M not only does not agree to having his name removed but states that his institution (a major US university) may take legal action if this occurs. However, Dr S, remains adamant that Dr M does not qualify as an author any more because the emphasis of the manuscript has changed in response to the reviewers' suggestions and his contributions have largely been removed. The editor refers the dispute to the British university where Dr S and several of the other authors work.
- How should the university handle this?



Scenario 4

- A university Research Integrity officer receives a complaint from a postgraduate student (Ms P) of bullying behaviour by a supervisor. Most of the allegations are rather vague but the most substantial is that Ms P was listed as 4th author on a publication but she thinks she should have been the 2nd author.
- How should the university handle this?

