Authorship or Contributorship?

Takako Kojima¹², Sae Nakano³ and J. Patrick Barron⁴⁵⁶

¹ Associate Professor, Department of International Medical Communications, Tokyo Medical University
² Member, COPE
³ Freelance Translator
⁴ Emeritus Professor, Tokyo Medical University
⁵ Council Member, COPE
⁶ Adjunct Professor, Seoul National Bundang Hospital

The following case brings to question what constitutes authorship and what measures need to be taken in order to avoid potential conflicts. Authorship is one of the main issues that can cause disputes among authors. Discussing and finalizing issues surrounding authorship before or at the time of manuscript preparation is the key to preparing and publishing manuscripts ethically, free of trouble.

Case Number 15–17

Requesting authorship after publication

Case text (Anonymized)

Our journal was contacted by an individual, Dr. H, who had recently seen a published article and was surprised that he was not listed as an author because it utilized samples from a database that he established. (The article was published online in November 2014 and in print in February 2015.) He stated that the cohort has spawned many projects, but he was not involved in the “specialist area” in this article. However, he believes he should have been listed as an author because the article would not have been possible without his database.

We told him that the journal conforms strictly to ICMJE’s policy on authorship and asked him for more information on his contributions. Although it appears that he fulfils the first criterion because of his involvement in the original cohort/database, he did not fulfile the other three criteria.

At this point we contacted the corresponding author of the article for more information. The corresponding author said that Dr. H contributed substantially to the development of the cohort, but was not involved in the design, evaluation or preparation of the data, and recommended publishing a correction with Dr. H listed in a simple acknowledgment (not as an author).

Dr. H was not satisfied with this solution, continuing to believe that he should be listed as an author. At this point we went back to the corresponding author who replied that he had discussed the situation further with his co-authors and Dr. H, and they thought that even though Dr. H does not fulfile the ICMJE criteria, they support his addition as an author because their own publication policy indicated that all PIs involved in the development of the cohort should be listed as authors for subsequent publications. The corresponding author acknowledged that this “puts [the journal] in a difficult position, and exposes problems with [their] publication policy, which need to be resolved, but if it were possible to add [Dr. H] to the authorship we should be grateful for your help.”

We replied to the corresponding author letting him know that he continues to state that Dr. H does not fulfile ICMJE criteria; in order to comply with journal policy, Dr. H should be listed in the acknowledgments. We even offered for them to write the acknowledgment so that Dr. H’s contributions would be better described. The corresponding author has yet to respond.

However, we received an email from Dr. H stating that he still does not believe that an acknowledgment is appropriate. (Per Dr. H, “This paper is no different to the way we approached all our other publications and [corresponding author] would certainly know that. I remain perplexed and quite upset as to why and how such a fundamental error was made on his part on this occasion.”) The corresponding author initially believed that an acknowledgment was appropriate, but then recommended the addition of Dr. H as an author. We maintain that an acknowledgment is appropriate, and that adding him as an author without fulfilling ICMJE criteria (journal policy) would be the equivalent of gift authorship.
Question(s) for the COPE Forum

Based on ICMJE criteria and journal policy, does the Forum believe that a formal erratum denoting an acknowledgment OR authorship is appropriate? If the latter, an explanation as to why would be very helpful.

Advice:

The case raises the issue of the role of contributorship. One solution in such cases is for journals to list the contributions of each author. When contributions are clearly listed on a paper, it sometimes becomes clear that some of the contributors do not in fact qualify for authorship, so this practice should be encouraged by journals.

COPE has produced a discussion document on “What constitutes authorship?” which sets out criteria for authorship across different disciplines, and the editor may wish to bring this to the attention of the institution.

The Forum agreed that institutions need to take responsibility for these types of decisions and should have robust mechanisms in place. It is almost impossible for journals and editors to sort out these issues on their own. Unfortunately many institutions fail to arbitrate in these situations. The Forum advised going back to the institution and asking them to address the issue.

The editor may like to look up CRediT (contributor roles taxonomy) which is a CASRAI activity that brings together a diverse set of stakeholders with a common interest in better understanding and communicating different types of contributor roles in research. The CRediT taxonomy may also be a solution in this new era of data sharing where a paper may wish to acknowledge the contribution of the data collectors who would not qualify for authorship.

The Forum also noted that the ICMJE guidelines state that acknowledgements require written permission from the person who is being acknowledged.

In summary, the Forum agreed that contacting the institution is the best way forward and asking them to suggest what should be done in this situation and to explain their policies and procedures in such instances.

Follow up:

To support a recommendation to publish a correction listing Dr. H in an acknowledgment (not as an author), the editors sent the institution the following post from Retraction Watch, which describes a similar situation. The institution agreed with this course of action. Although the institution included an apology in their draft correction, the journal opted not to include it in the final correction. The correction will appear in an upcoming volume (in print and online). Prior to publication, the final correction was emailed to Dr. H, Dr. D and the institution. The editor pointed out that it is the responsibility of the corresponding author, Dr. D, to share the final correction, as well as explain the situation as a whole, with all of the coauthors (if he had not already done so). The editor also encouraged the authors to use this experience as a learning opportunity to begin discussions of authorship and acknowledgments at the stage of study conception.

Resolution: Case Closed  Year: 2015
版される論文に、著者として記載されるべきであると示されているからとのことであった。代表著者は、これが「（ジャーナルを）難しい立場に立たせ、（彼らの）掲載（出版）方針に問題があることを露呈し、それは解決する必要があることを認めつつも、もし著者として（H 医師を）加えることが可能ならば、ジャーナルの助力に感謝すること」のとのことであった。

我々は、H 医師はICMJEの著者資格を満たしておらず、ジャーナルの方針に従うには、H 医師を謝辞に記載するべきであることを知らせざるべき、代表著者に返信した。我々は、さらに、H 医師の貢献をより詳細に謝辞に記述できるよう文面を作成する、とまで提案したが、それに至り、代表著者は、まだ返信してきていなかった。

しかし、我々はH 医師より、謝辞が適切とは依然として考えていないとのメールを受け取った。（H 医師によれば、「この論文は、我々が他の掲載（出版）全てに行っている取り組みと何ら変わらず、代表著者側で発生したのかについては、いまだに困惑し、かつ非常に失望している。」）代表著者は、当初、謝辞が適切だと考えていたが、その後、H 医師を著者として加えることを提案してきた。我々としては、謝辞が適切であり、ICMJEの著者資格（ジャーナルの方針）を満たさずに著者として加えることは、ギフトオーサーシップに相当するのではないかとの立場に変わりはない。

COPEフォーラムへの質問

ICMJEの基準とジャーナルの方針に基づき、COPEフォーラムは、謝辞を書き直し正式に誤りがあったことを記述する、あるいはオーサーシップを与える、どちらかが適切だと思うか？後者の場合、その理由の説明をしてもらうと大変助かります。

COPEからの助言

本事例は、貢献者の役割という問題を提起している。こうしたケースの解決策の1つは、ジャーナルが各著者の貢献を記載することである。論文に貢献を明示することで、実際にはオーサーシップの基準を満たさない貢献者が明らかになる場合があるため、ジャーナルはこれを行うことが推奨される。

COPEは、さまざまな分野を越えてオーサーシップの基準を説明した“What constitutes authorship?”（「何がオーサーシップに相当するのか」）について議論の文書を作成した。編集者は、この存在を所属機関に知らせるのもよいかもしれない。

COPEフォーラムは、著者の所属機関がこうした種類の決断に責任を持つ必要があり、きちんとした仕組みを機能させるべきであるとの合意に達した。このような問題をジャーナルや編集者だけで解決することは不可能である。残念ながら、多くの機関では、こうした状況で仲裁裁断を行っていない。COPEフォーラムは、著者に所属機関に戻り、この問題を提出するよう助言した。

編集者は、共通の利益を持つさまざまな関係者を集めて、研究における異なる種類の貢献者の役割について、より理解し、情報交換をするためのCASRAI活動の1つであるCRediT（貢献者の役割分類法）を参照するのもよいかもしれない。論文の中で、オーサーシップの基準を満たさないデータ収集者の貢献に謝辞を述べるべき場合がありうる。データ共有というこの新時代において、CRediTは、1つの解決法であるかもしれない。

COPEフォーラムはまた、ICMJEのガイドラインは、謝辞について、謝辞を表明される人からの書面による許可が必要であると述べていることも触れた。

要約すると、COPEフォーラムは、今後は所属機関に連絡を取ることがベストであり、所属機関に、こうした状況で何をするべきか提案してくれるよう、また、こうしたケースにおける方針と手順を説明してくれるよう依頼するのがよい、とのことで合意した。

その後の経過

H 医師を（著者としてではなく）謝辞に記載、という修正を掲載（出版）するという勧告を裏づけるため、編集者はRetraction Watch（撤回の監視）から、類似の状況を記した知らせを著者の所属機関に送ったところ、所属機関は、一連の行動に同意した。所属機関は、原稿修正に際し謝罪を含めたが、ジャーナルは最終的な修正段階で謝罪を含めないことに決めた。修正は近く発行される号（印刷版、オンライン版両方）で掲載される、掲載（出版）に先立ち、最終修正は、H 医師、D 医師が所属機関宛メールで送られた。編集者は、代表著者であるD 医師に、（もしだ行っていないのであれば）共著者全員に最終修正について知らせ、併せて本件全体の状況を説明する責任があると指摘した。編集者は、新たに研究の概要を決める段階で、オーサーシップと謝辞の議論を始める機会として、この経験を生かすよう著者らに勧告した。

決議：解決済

年：2015年

As previously discussed2) the ICMJE authorship criteria consists of 4 criteria which are, substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content, AND final approval of the version to be published, AND 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)

The highlights of this case are the following: 1) Dr. H only fulfilled the first criterion of the ICMJE authorship criteria but believed that he was eligible to be an author; 2) the corresponding author and coauthors decided that it was acceptable to “give” authorship to Dr. H despite knowing that he did not fulfil the 4 criteria; 3) Dr. H refused to accept the journal’s decision to comply with their policy, thereby not including him as an author but listing him in the Acknowledgements; and 4) this dispute took place after publication.

We have pointed out before that authorship is not something that can be simply given or earned by providing research funding or being the principal investigator. If it is “given”, this would be considered gift authorship, which is an unethical practice. In order to be listed as an author or coauthor, it is necessary to qualify for authorship by fulfilling all 4 criteria. If an individual contributes significantly to the research but fails to meet all 4 conditions, then the rule is to list that person in the Acknowledgements section after obtaining written permission to do so.

Journals may have their own ideas and policies on authorship. However, since the majority of international journals recognize and adhere to ICMJE authorship criteria, authors must be aware of this fact. The AMA manual of style states that authors may not be aware of the ICMJE authorship criteria. In this case, the corresponding author and coauthors felt that it was easier to accept Dr. H as an additional author even though they knew that this would go against ICMJE policy. One effective way to inform or remind authors of these responsibilities is to have journals require authors to attest in writing how they qualify for authorship and to indicate specific contributions to the work.5) Some journals publish author contributions in order to make them transparent to all readers and editors, and this practice has been endorsed by the ICMJE and the Council of Science Editors.5)

Authors need to remind themselves how important it is to understand, respect, and abide by journal policy as much effort and time is utilized to create such policies. It is no surprise that the journal did not accept a change in authorship but suggested publishing a correction notice (since this occurred after publication) and inclusion of Dr. H in the Acknowledgements.

Closing Message

Two things can be learned from this case. One is that determining the order and who qualifies as authors is an issue that ought to be discussed and decided at the beginning; and second, that unless each author respects author responsibilities, including authorship criteria, it could harm all efforts made by journals and specialized committees to promote ethical publishing.

References

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