Potentially Dangerous Mistakes in Publication Ethics: Unethical Authorship

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In our previous articles to date, we have focused on components related to effective manuscript preparation, while reinforcing the significance of following the Instructions to Authors and ICMJE Recommendations1) which are essential for ethical scholarly publishing. We now take this series to the next level, focusing on issues pertaining to research integrity such as authorship, plagiarism, scientific misconduct, conflicts of interest, duplicate and redundant publication. We will introduce serious and dangerous mistakes within this realm that could potentially damage an author’s reputation and career.

Some organizations promoting ethical practices

• The Committee on Publication Ethics
  Before we address any specific issue, it is important to introduce the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)2). The issues surrounding publication ethics often raise many common concerns, not only among authors, but journals. COPE is an organization that readers will often come across when reading about publication ethics. You could say that while the ICMJE Recommendations are there to guide authors in preparing manuscripts, COPE is there to assist editors and publishers on how to handle misconduct and conflict. Since its foundation in 1997, COPE has provided guidance to editors and publishers concerning cases of misconduct through its COPE flowcharts (simple, step-by-step advice on certain issues)3), and forums offered to its members for informal discussions on ethical problems. When in doubt about how ethical problems are handled in scientific publications by journals, we recommend authors to access the COPE homepage and its flowcharts, for an overall understanding of the process.

• International Society for Medical Publication Professionals
  The International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP) is a not-for-profit organization which was founded in 2005. Its members include professionals from both the pharmaceutical and biotechnological industry, and medical communication companies, in addition to academia, journal editorial staff, publishers, and professional in-house and freelance medical writers4). ISMPP has produced guidelines called the Good Publication Practice (GPP) guidelines, to enhance ethical and effective publication5).

What is authorship?

COPE, in addition to many international journals, suggests using the ICMJE authorship criteria which consists of 4 criteria. There are many misconceptions about what constitutes authorship, and this is also greatly affected by the culture and environment to which the author belongs6). However, the ICMJE states that unless all 4 criteria are met, a person cannot be considered to be an author.

The 4 criteria are 7):

1. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND
2. Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND
3. Final approval of the version to be published; AND
4. 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.

This means that providing only general supervision or only acquiring funding for the study does not automatically give someone authorship. In order to promote and enforce the full understanding of authorship, many journals now ask authors to provide information on how each author contributed. If anyone does not meet full authorship criteria but contributed greatly, he/she should be mentioned in the Acknowledgements section, after obtaining permission to do so from that person.

Of course there are other definitions of authorship that are followed by certain journals, such as the Council of Science Editors (CSE)\(^8\), therefore it is necessary to follow the Instructions to Authors of your target journal and adhere to the policy stated, so that if problems concerning authorship arise, such as changes in the order of authorship, or authorship disputes, the criteria are clearly understood by all authors involved.

**Unethical practices in authorship**

• Guest authorship

Guest authorship is defined as someone accepting to be listed as an author even though full authorship criteria are not met. It is also referred to as ‘gift authorship’ because authorship is given to an ineligible person. Accepting guest authorship is unethical because, as mentioned above, authorship can only be *earned* by satisfying all 4 criteria stated by the ICMJE, and is not something that can be *given* easily. Although guest authorship does unfortunately occur in academia, it is not something that should be tolerated\(^9\).

• Ghost-writers

Use of a ghost-writer is also unethical. Ghost-writers are generally writers who have not done research but are given data to write the paper. Although they actually may (or may not) meet authorship criteria, they do not disclose their involvement or funding source. This is dangerous because they may try to control the content of a paper, perhaps on behalf of a commercial institution, without anyone knowing. It is also important to distinguish ghost-writers from professional medical writers, as working with professional medical writers is ethical. Whenever an author acquires help in writing, editing, or translating a paper, this must be acknowledged to ensure ethical writing.

**Closing message**

It should be understood that authorship criteria needs to be met not only by the first author but all coauthors. Ensuring transparent and ethical publications lies in the hands of each author who must act honestly and responsibly.

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