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DID SHAKESPEARE WRITE HAMLET?

Did William Shakespeare (1564–1616) write the comedies such as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It* and tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*? Strange as this question may sound, many modern-day scholars take it seriously. The doubts arise mainly because the authorship in those days was not recorded carefully.^[1] Alas, five centuries later, somewhat similar questions still arise. Has someone named as an author really contributed to the work? Doubts are sometimes confirmed by the most unlikely source, as happened when a well-known author admitted that he was not part of the work and was made an author out of politeness as he was the head of the department, but the admission came only after no evidence was found to support the findings of a paper published in the *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*.^[2] Examples of this phenomenon, known as gift authorship, are available in plenty.^[2] The origins of gift authorship lie in the expected academic, social and financial benefits. This is often a reciprocally altruistic phenomenon. Generally, it repays some kindness or is done in exchange of authorship of some other paper.

GIFT AUTHORSHIP, PRESSURED AUTHORSHIP, GHOST AUTHORSHIP

Gift authorship (also known as guest authorship, honorary authorship, unjustified authorship or undeserved authorship) is said to exist when an individual is included among the authors without fulfilling the requirement of authorship. You may find

a person who is nowhere related to the topic in hand being put as an author or the editor may get a request to add someone's name at the time of publication for inclusion in the list of authors. Although this is the most frequent form of misconduct related to authorship,^[3] there are other identified authorship misconducts also.^[4] These are a person's use of his/her position to be included as an author without being qualified (pressured authorship) and non-inclusion of an individual as author despite being qualified (ghost authorship, uncompleted authorship or "denial of authorship"). Recently, in the discussion forum of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), it came to light that a similar paper to that already published has been submitted for publication. On investigation, the author of the recently submitted paper claimed that someone had published his paper without his knowledge and he had been denied of authorship in the published paper.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF MEDICAL JOURNAL EDITORS (ICMJE), WAME, COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATION ETHICS (COPE), COUNCIL OF SCIENCE EDITORS (CSE)

Partly as a response to such events, the ICMJE (the Vancouver group) tried to define the criteria for authorship. The basic premise was that each author should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for it.^[5] Some other groups are also working along similar lines, the most active ones being the WAME,^[6] COPE^[7] and CSE.^[8]

WHO IS AN AUTHOR?

Six hundred and eighty-nine medical journals, including the *Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology (IJDVL)*, follow the ICMJE's Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals.^[5] An "author" is generally considered to be someone who has made substantive intellectual contributions to a published study. The ICJME has recommended the

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following criteria for authorship: "Authorship credit should be based on: (1) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data or analysis and interpretation of data, (2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content and (3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions 1, 2 and 3." ICMJE also mentions that acquisition of funding, collection of data or general supervision of the research group alone does not constitute authorship. Basically, an author's responsibility begins with conception of the work and continues till the proof reading is done.

ARE THE RECOMMENDATIONS WORKING?

The recommendations are a major step forward, but they have only partially solved the problem. Studies have shown that a large number of authors fail to meet these criteria.^[2] A study concluded that over a 20-year period, the number of authors of original articles in the British Medical Journal has increased, mainly because of the rise of authorship among professors and department chairpersons (heads).^[9] In a survey of 12 papers, only 32 out of 84 authors fulfilled the criteria for authorship and 19 possibly did so.^[10]

Another study found that 62 of 1176 authors of 184 papers had made no substantial contributions to six major tasks (conception, design, provision of resources, collection of data, analysis and interpretation of data, writing or revising drafts), while a further 206 contributed only by providing resources or collecting data.^[11]

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS RECOGNIZED BY THE IJDVL?

After the editors of IJDVL provisionally accept your paper, the corresponding author is asked to fill an online form called author/bibliographic details. In this form, beside other things, the contributions of different authors are to be selected from a list. The different contributions mentioned in the list are: concepts, design, definition of intellectual content, literature search, clinical studies, experimental studies, data acquisition, data analysis, statistical analysis, manuscript preparation and manuscript editing and revision. This information remains with the editors only. Some journals do publish information about the contributions of each author, at least for research papers.

ORDER OF AUTHORSHIP

The order of authorship should be a joint decision of the coauthors. A task force of the CSE on authorship has suggested assigning authorship of journal articles strictly by descending order of contribution, with first place being the first prize.^[12] This recommendation refers to papers about clinical medicine. A different tradition is generally followed in basic sciences, where the first author (usually a post-doctoral fellow) has usually made the maximum contribution and the last author is the supervisor or team leader.^[13] In the post-graduate thesis dissertation, in the event of its unlikely publication in India, who should be its first author, the post-graduate student or his guide, a teacher, remains a question to be answered. Many a time the guide may have struggled to complete the thesis dissertation and may claim to be its first author.

NUMBER OF AUTHORS

The ICMJE does not specify any upper limit for the number of authors of the papers. Some journals, however, do specify an upper limit on the number of authors of some sections of the journals. For example, IJDVL specifies an upper limit of four authors for case reports. The Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology (JAAD) does not specify any such limit. This could explain the results of a recent work in which the number of authors of single case reports (reports of one case) in IJDVL and JAAD were counted and compared. Results showed that there were significantly more authors and significantly more papers with more than four authors in the JAAD.^[14] In an effort to minimize gift authorship, Indian Pediatrics limited the number of authorship to five, four and two for brief reports, case reports and letters to the editor, respectively, from January 2003. A study showed that since then there has been a significant reduction in the number of senior authors contributing to the authorship.^[15] It appears that specifying a limit on the number of authors may limit the problem of gift authorship.

CONTRIBUTORSHIP

The acknowledgments section of the paper provides an opportunity to thank individuals who have contributed to the work but do not fulfill authorship criteria. According to the ICMJE, all contributors who do not meet the criteria for authorship should be listed

in an acknowledgments section. Examples of those who might be acknowledged include a person who provided purely technical help, writing assistance or a department chair who provided only general support.^[5] Financial and material support should also be acknowledged.

WHAT CAN BE DONE? A FEW IDEAS

Recommendations are only guidelines and it depends on the authors whether they follow them or not and on the editors whether and to what extent they can implement them. Perhaps most importantly, those who have really carried out the work will have an interest in seeing that their role is not devalued or diluted by the inclusion of many who have performed little.^[2] I think that it is very important for the journals to ask the authors their individual contributions as the IJDVL does. But this information should be sought at the time of submission of papers. If the editors feel that the contribution of an individual mentioned as author does not fulfill the authorship criteria, this issue should be resolved before the paper is sent to referees. An indicator of gift authorship would be present when more than one author have been mentioned as making the same contribution, especially in less-exhaustive works such as case reports. Later on, if the paper is accepted for publication, these individual contributions of the authors should preferably be published. There would be a problem of space if this is done, but it is very important, as the foregoing discussion shows. The contributions can be printed in a small font size. Now-a-days most of the journals have their online editions, where the space available is unlimited. Therefore, publishing online the individual contributions would be very easy. If this is done, a line can appear in the printed edition stating that authors' contributions are available online. Secondly, an approach that appears to work^[14,15] is specifying limits on the number of authors for different sections of the

journal, especially for less-exhaustive ones. By using these and other approaches, it may be possible to give the credit of authorship where it truly belongs.

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