

Tackling polyauthoritis giftosa

Sir,

Sanjay Singh in his recent IJDVL publication^[1] deals with the important and often ‘thorny’ issue of authorship in articles. Gift authorship, as identified by Singh, is a significant issue facing science, especially journal editors, and it is often difficult to be able to trace this phenomenon in the submitted articles. The Lancet recently had to come out with an editorial denouncing gift or honorary authorship,^[2] and highlighting how those given gift authorships often rapidly dissociate themselves with manuscripts on which scientific or ethical doubts are raised. This phenomenon was comically termed as ‘polyauthoritis giftosa’ by Kapoor in 1994.^[3] I would like to focus a bit more on this issue; it is imperative that authorship is earned and not gifted.^[4]

Gifting authorship can be broadly attributed to a sense of obligation, fear of retribution or for ensuring future prospective personal benefits (like reciprocal gift authorship, promotion, favoritism). This is especially a cultural issue in our institutions, which have a lot of power differentials between various faculty members according to seniority. This often makes it difficult for a postgraduate or lecturer to publish articles without including his or her professor’s and/or head of department’s name, even if the latter has not done any real work on the article. Pressures to

‘publish or perish’ and prestige in academia are other factors. Sanjay Singh and colleagues in an earlier article in this journal^[5] had compared the number of authors of single case reports in the Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology, and Leprology (IJVLD) with the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology (JAAD); they postulated that one of the reasons that there were a high number of authors of the single case reports in these two dermatology journals (especially in the JAAD) was gift authorship.

Unambiguous guidelines like those by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (<http://www.icmje.org/>) exist on who deserves to be an author. However, guidelines are regularly flouted and are clearly not enough. To bring about change, systemic reforms need to be evolved. This includes continuous training and guidance for students, residents, and faculty members. Disclosure of problems and pressures being faced by individual researchers with regard to authorship assignment should be encouraged through mechanisms that ensure confidentiality and prompt action. Whistleblowers often get vilified and discouraged; they deserve protection and encouragement for bringing forth cases of wrongdoing. In case of disputes, the issue should be decided by supervisory committees established at the institutional level, to ensure that the publications being sent from the institute follow the applicable guidelines, including those on publication. It would be ideal that such committees have non-institutional members to promote independence and to avoid conflict of interest. Often, such committees already exist in institutions in the form of ethics committees, and these could be encouraged to arbitrate when there are concerns around authorship of manuscripts in the institution.

Individuals who do not fulfill the authorship criteria, but have been of assistance in the development of the article (or in the background research) are usually included in the acknowledgment section. Part of the problem here is that being acknowledged does not constitute much academic or professional ‘currency’. Acknowledgments need to be considered with more respect by the scientific community, and should count more in career enhancement and annual performance evaluation.

We need to prioritize instituting control and redressal mechanisms in our settings to address the problem of gift authorship. These reforms will help enhance honorable scientific conduct and quality of the publications in journals.

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