

Number of authors of single case reports in Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology and Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology

Sir,

Authorship of a paper usually provides academic rewards. An author is generally considered to be someone who has made substantive intellectual contribution to a published work.^[1] We have noted that sometimes the number of authors for less exhaustive sections of a journal, such as case reports, is 7 or 8 or even more.

Purpose of this work was to find out the average number of authors of single case reports in two reputed dermatology journals, and whether there are significant differences between them in this regard. We selected two reputed dermatology journals – Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology (IJDVL), and Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology (JAAD). As some of the case reports included more than one case, we selected only those reports that discussed single cases (single case reports). We selected 100 single case reports from each journal, irrespective of the journal section in which they appeared. These 100 articles were selected consecutively starting with the last such report in the May–June 2008 issue of IJDVL and June 2008 issue of JAAD and then going backwards. Thus, for IJDVL, the 100th article selected was the third letter to the editor published in the May–June 2007 issue. For JAAD, the issues screened included the supplements of February and May 2008, and the 100th article selected was the third case report published in February 2008 supplement.

The number of authors of single case reports published in IJDVL ranged from 1–7 with a mean of 3.30 and the number for JAAD ranged from 2–9 with a mean of 4.19 [Table 1]. Twenty one single case reports published in IJDVL and 32 in JAAD had more than four authors. These differences were highly significant, both for the mean number of authors and for the proportion of papers with more than four authors [Table 1].

Although the instructions for authors of IJDVL do not specify a limit on the number of authors of case reports,^[2] the copyright form (also known as contributors’ form) of IJDVL specifies a limit of four authors for case reports.^[3] No such limit is mentioned on the website of JAAD.^[4] We are unable to explain the reasons for significantly more number of authors of single case reports in JAAD. One possible explanation could be the desire to include someone, who may have made a minor or no contribution, as author just to please or help her/him, something that is known as gift authorship. Of course, as this cannot be proved or disproved, it remains only a hypothesis. The gift of authorship can sometimes turn sour, as once happened when no evidence was found to support

the findings of a paper published in the British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology and one of the authors admitted that he was not part of the work and was made an author out of politeness.^[5] The results of our study may be showing a lesser tendency toward gift authorship in IJDVL, possibly due to the specification mentioned in its copyright form. We accept that there may be other, perhaps more valid, reasons for our findings that we are unable to think.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (Vancouver group) has recommended the following criteria for authorship: (1) substantial contributions to conception and design, or 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.^[1] Both IJDVL and JAAD have requested inclusion in the list of publications that follow the Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts submitted to Biomedical Journals as decided by the above group.

While it is not possible to have a perfect system to have only those persons as authors who have really made substantial contribution, it is important to have some guidelines regarding the number of authors. Some journals now request and also publish information about the contributions of each person named as having participated in a submitted study, at least for original research.^[1] When a paper is found suitable for publication in IJDVL, it is provisionally accepted and the corresponding author is asked to fill an online form called bibliographic details. In this form, authors’ individual contributions are to be selected from a list. Similarly, authors for JAAD are required to fill a form, called authorship statement (also called authorship declaration),^[6] where different tasks performed by an author are to be identified. These are important efforts in the right direction. The editors may also inquire individual contributions of authors more specifically when their number appears to be disproportionately more in comparison to the amount of work submitted for publication. If it appears that someone’s contribution is not sufficient, name of such person may be mentioned in acknowledgment. Presently, it appears that by using these two approaches, that is, limiting the number of authors for different sections of the journal and asking their individual contributions and possibly publishing them, it may be possible to give the credit of authorship where it truly belongs.

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Table 1: Number of authors of single case reports in the two dermatology journals

	IJDVL	JAAD	P
n*	100	100	
Mean (SD)	3.3 (1.40)	4.19(1.54)	< 0.0001**
No. of papers with >4 authors	21	32	<0.0001***

*n, number of case reports; **Unpaired t test; ***Chi square test

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