Editorial

Purposes of medical research and rights of researchers and fellows

Keywords: First authorship; Principal investigator; Researcher; Academic harassment

The rights of researchers and fellows involved in the principal activities of medical research have not always been properly acknowledged. This article will discuss the purposes of medical research, the rights of researchers and fellows, the attitudes of the hosting institute, and the academic society concerned, and measures for dealing with conflicts regarding publication, if any should occur.

1. Purposes of medical research

With what aims do we undertake medical research? Is it not, ultimately, for the pursuit of the well-being and happiness of every human upon this planet that we embark on this course? The medical researcher must endeavor to perform his duties in a manner that is logically consistent with that purpose. Research activities seek out scientifically the truths that are hidden within every aspect of nature, and culminate in their description in academic journals. These findings are intended to contribute, whether soon or in the distant future, to the welfare of the human race. Frequently, this type of research does not rest upon the shoulders of individuals working alone, but depends on the efforts, experience, and teamwork of many. In the case of clinical research, the co-operation of the patients themselves also represents a great contribution. The understandings offered by the results of both basic and clinical research are invariably limited truths based on limited conditions. All researchers need to acknowledge these limitations, and must honor their duty to inform their readers of what they are.

In the face of the great truths embodied in this inexpressibly vast universe, the researched facts — the 'little truths' extracted and grasped by researchers — pale into insignificance, just as this minuscule speck on which all of us live is of no significance in comparison with the vastness of the cosmos. This can serve as a metaphor for researchers, who would do well to recognize with great humility how much is yet to be known and how minor their discoveries are.

The road to the happiness and well-being of humanity is a very long one. A researcher’s awareness that more efforts in this direction are essential may well be enough to arouse that great humility naturally. A person gaining a new understanding of a medical discovery that has a major impact on society, and claiming it as his own individual achievement, quite oblivious of any spirit of service or contribution toward the welfare and happiness of mankind, demonstrates a deplorable misconception of the quintessence of medical research. It is self-evident that the unseemly vying for credit and status that has become associated with the Nobel prize awards is far removed from any contribution to humanity, and Alfred Nobel himself would have detested it.

2. Rights of researchers and fellows

Is this kind of sincere and humble attitude being actively kept alive within the world of medical research and in the publication of its results? As regards research, although the relationship between the principal investigator (PI) and the researchers, fellows and residents below him or her follows, to some extent, the employer—worker pattern, their actual roles in research activities are as yet not clearly delineated. Research in the medical field is hardly ever carried out by a single individual, and usually — indeed, almost always — is an uneven collaboration by a PI and a number of subordinates, to each of whom particular duties are assigned. It is the PI’s job to plan the research, and it is the PI, also, who carries out with responsibility the investigative work and the management of the practical experimental details of a study. The PI, then, bears most of the burden of that study, and so must, by rights, become the first author. However, the PI’s role may be somewhat restricted to the mere planning of the research work, and largely divorced from any actual ‘hands-on’ research, with the result that it becomes the task of a researcher or a fellow to write the manuscript. Under such circumstances, the PI should surely not become the first authorship; Principal investigator; Researcher; Academic harassment

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author. Fundamentally, the status of an article’s first author should be given to the person who has made the most significant contributions to the article’s content [1]; although major surgical journals have created a broad consensus statement that the order of authorship should be jointly decided by the co-authors [2].

While participating in an employment relationship, researchers and fellows are obliged to follow certain regulations in the workplace. Furthermore, it is extremely important that they establish a sound relationship with the PI, holding the noble intentions of medical research firmly in mind. However, although a person follows regulations and principles, and works diligently, it may happen that a PI intentionally ignores a draft written by a young researcher, keeping it on his desk for an extended period without proper review. What is expected of the PI is, first and foremost, a keen awareness not only of the immediate and higher aims of medical research, but also of the ethical and humane management that is expected of a leader, and not the pursuit of merely personal benefit. If the PI oversteps his authority and violates the rights of a researcher or a fellow in a vulnerable position, academic harassment has occurred. Accordingly, it is incumbent upon each institution to establish for itself a professional conduct committee to make a third-party assessment of the situation and to provide appropriate guidance to both the PI and the research workers.

Problems regarding the rights of individual researchers and fellows can appear not only domestically but also within the international relationships that accompany globalization; and in such relationships, foreign researchers are sometimes placed in extremely vulnerable positions. This must be fully and generally recognized. It is the moral duty of international academic organizations to maintain both full awareness of the lofty goals of medical research, and sincere dedication to them, and to enlighten their members on the purposes of medical research and the rights of researchers and fellows so that all research work is conducted as a truly international collaborative enterprise directed towards the ultimate welfare of the human race.

References


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