Authorship: the Emerging Importance of Accountability

Fernando Alfonso discusses new proposals for authors on behalf of the ESC Editors’ Network Task Force

The Editors’ Network of the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) is devoted to foster collaboration among ESC National Societies Cardiovascular Journals (NSCJ).1–4 Promoting editorial excellence is also considered a key aspect to increase the scientific prestige of NSCJ.1–5 The Editors’ Network endorses the recommendations of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE).6 In their last revision, the ICMJE recommendations included a fourth criterion for authorship to emphasize each author’s responsibility to stand by the integrity of the entire work.1,7

This change in authorship criteria will help to address previous undesired situations where some authors were unable to or refused to respond to inquiries on potential scientific misconduct simply by denying any responsibility.6–9 The novel idea here is to emphasize the responsibility of each author to stand for the integrity of the entire work. This fourth criterion suggests that each author must cooperate to clarify misconduct related issues in the event the paper is called into question.6–9

Authorship provides prestige, credit and scientific recognition. In fact, authorship remains a major criterion for promotion and career advancement among scholars. Total number of publications and citations are still widely used to ascertain the academic value of individual investigators.1–3 The ICMJE recommendations on authorship indicate that anybody who has made a ‘substantive’ intellectual contribution to a paper deserves the corresponding credit.6 Editors are unable to judge whether authors have met the authorship criteria. According to the ICMJE criteria6 persons who ‘only’ provide:

a. recruitment of patients to a trial,
b. general data/sample collection, or
c. funding/administrative supervision of the research group,

do not qualify as an author.

Persons with significant contribution to the work but who do not meet the four criteria for authorship, should be only acknowledged. Now, any author should be also prepared to take public responsibility for the work and ensure its accuracy.6

Currently, the ICMJE does not mandate that all authors detail what exact ‘contributions’ qualify them to be an author.6 However, honesty and openness in attribution is the only way to ensure fairness in credit. To promote transparency on specific contributions, editors are now encouraged to implement contributorship policies.6,10,11 Contributorship ‘badges’ readily capture the different types of collaboration allowing a more accurate and granular assessment of credit. The value of assigning a numerical value to further assess the extent of relative contributions and to create a contribution-specific index for each author has been suggested to better ascertain research productivity.5,10,11

Collaboration has become increasingly important in science because the complexity of modern research tends to involve different competencies.12 Likewise, many centres may be required to recruit the required number of patients. Studies suggest that the number of co-authors per paper in medical literature has increased exponentially.13,14 As a research project involves a defined amount of work, the larger the number of authors in a paper the smaller the merit that any given author deserves. Therefore, the use of co-author-adjusted citation indexes have been suggested to account for this phenomenon.10,15

Authorship confers credit but also implies a major responsibility. Specific responsibilities should be tied to different research roles. Guarantors, vouching for the integrity of the entire work, are especially required in multicentre studies. Likewise, authors of sponsored studies should indicate that they had full access to the data and take complete responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the analysis. The COPE
Committee on Publication Ethics; www.publicationethics.org) guidelines are useful to solve potential disputes among authors.16 With a growing number of authors, it is increasingly difficult to identify those who may be held morally responsible should scientific misconduct be detected.13,14 This explains the importance of the emphasis on accountability in the new authorship criteria. These requirements nicely balance credit with responsibility.6 This editorial initiative from the Editors’ Network of the ESC aims to increase awareness on the importance of the new ICMJE recommendations on authorship and encourages all NSCJ to align their editorial policies in this regard.

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References
References are available as supplementary material at European Heart Journal online.

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ESC Focuses on Greater Financial Disclosure for All Volunteers

For the European Society of Cardiology (ESC), it is the bedrock of everything they do: the Declaration of Interest (DOI). And it is the focus of increasing scrutiny within the organization.

With more than 1900 volunteers involved in ESC’s core activities, an annual DOI requirement ensures greater transparency into the decisions they make, many of which can impact healthcare in Europe and beyond.

‘By having a clear policy, the ESC is aiming to ensure the trustworthiness of its guidelines, for example’ said Professor Carlos Aguiar, a member of the ESC Task Force on the Declaration of Interest. ‘If the ESC is trusted by healthcare professionals and patients, it will be more successful in its mission to reduce the burden of cardiovascular disease’.

To further build that trust and transparency, the ESC is launching a new initiative to report DOI activities on its website and explain the specific process that it follows. In 2017, for example, more than 99% of all ESC volunteers filed a DOI form for their work on the various committees, task forces, and boards. A total of 72 potential conflicts were identified. A careful peer review concluded that in four of those cases, the conflicts were real, and the volunteers were asked to step down from their ESC role.

For a task force writing ESC Clinical Practice Guidelines, each member has her/his DOI posted on the ESC website. A conflict of interest typically exists when a person is in a position to derive personal benefit from actions or decisions made in their official capacity within the ESC.

‘Conflict of interest, or the perception of a conflict, is something we deal with every day in all parts of life’, said Luciano Respini, who chairs the ESC’s Audit Committee. ‘Our challenge is to manage those interests to make sure they do not include a bias’. Physicians who are highly recognized experts in a certain field of medicine are often sought out by the healthcare industry as advisors because of their knowledge and experience. The ESC takes precautions in this situation by asking members to openly declare any direct or indirect interests and abstain from voting on related issues.

‘It is often difficult or impossible to include only individuals that have no financial interests at all since collaboration with the healthcare industry is important for many fields of medicine’, said Professor Guenter Breithardt, who chairs the ESC’s Ethics and Oversight Committee.

‘The solution is to declare and publish these interests in an open manner so that others can make their own judgements’, he added. A person who may have considerable interest in a field where they hold a patent, for example, may be completely unbiased on other topics. That person could also be very helpful in offering views during task force deliberations in an area where they have this in-depth knowledge and interest.

The ESC began requesting DOIs in 2002 from volunteers working on its clinical practice guidelines. It was then expanded to all ESC volunteers and all activities. In 2011, a web portal was created to manage