Editorial

Who Should Be an Author?

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Published online 31 October 2007

Disputes about authorship and acknowledgement in scientific papers certainly date back to the 17th century (Pugliese, 2004) and have not ended. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) lists 18 cases on which it has given advice (COPE, 2007), and its current discussions include alleged attempts by department heads to claim unjustified co-authorship of their staff’s publications.

This journal’s policy is stated in the Instructions for Authors on our website (http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/annhyg/for_authors/general.html). ‘The preferred practice is that persons should only be named as authors if they have made significant identifiable intellectual contributions to the work, and other contributions may be recognized by acknowledgement at the end of the submission’. For further details, the Instructions refer to guidelines issued by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE, 2006) and the COPE (2003).

The ICMJE guidelines are particularly helpful, and we quote here their main points:

Authorship credit should be based on 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.

The final ‘and’ is significant: authors should meet all three of the above criteria, not just one of them. ICMJE continues:

Acquisition of funding, collection of data, or general supervision of the research group, alone, does not justify authorship.

All persons designated as authors should qualify for authorship, and all those who qualify should be listed.

Each author should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content.

Contributors who do not meet the criteria for authorship should be listed in the acknowledgements, such as ‘a person who provided purely technical help, writing assistance, or a department chair who provided only general support’. ICMJE also gives guidance for the case of a study conducted by a large multi-centre group. It is possible for the group to be listed as an author, but the group must identify individuals who take responsibility for the paper.

COPE (2003) gives more specific guidance on the practice of a sponsor’s assistance in the writing of papers, saying that, for example, professional writers employed by pharmaceutical companies and medical agencies should be included in the list of authors ‘and any conflicts of interest declared’.

It is not usually possible for a journal to tell whether or not these criteria have been met—the people involved in the project are usually the only people who know—but in cases which come to our attention we will apply COPE’s (2003) guidelines.

REFERENCES


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