Editorial

Guidelines for Assigning Authorship

Authorship may be one of the least understood aspects of publication. Authorship sounds straightforward when considered as a method to assign credit where credit is due. In practice, however, the ambiguous nature of "credit" can be a significant problem. And, unless the journal's information for authors section includes guidelines for contributorship, authors may find themselves with little direction for these important decisions.

Although authorship is quite clear when a sole author has individually conceptualized and created the manuscript, questions often arise when two or more individuals were involved in some way. Authors ask: Should I list everyone who was involved in the research study or project whether or not they wrote part of the manuscript? Should research assistants be included as authors? How much should a co-author be expected to contribute? Answers to these questions are frequently sought from faculty members or colleagues who have acquired their expertise through the oral histories of their own mentors. "Local customs" can be a shaky foundation for authorship decisions (Albert & Wager, 2003, p. 32). Considering the ethical and political consequences involved, authors are advised to base their decisions on established guidelines.

The most frequently quoted guidelines for authorship are the work of international committees: The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) (available at http://www.icmje.org/) and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) (available at http://www.publicationethics.org.uk/guidelines). Although nurse authors may question the absence of a guideline for and about nursing, it is important to note that these are the resources listed by the International Academy of Nursing Editors (http://www.inane.vcu.edu/).

The ICMJE guidelines specify that authorship 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 (The International Committee, 2006, p. 5).

Importantly, the guidelines state "Authors should meet conditions 1, 2, and 3" (The International Committee, 2006, p. 5). Thus, if a research assistant collected data but did not participate in writing or final editing of the manuscript, the assistant should be recognized in the acknowledgement section, not as a co-author. This is in keeping with ICMJE guidelines that specify "acquisition of funding, collection of data, or general supervision of the research group, alone, does not justify authorship" (p. 5). Further, "Each author should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content" (p. 6). Similarly, COPE guidelines clarify that "if there is no task that can reasonably be attributed to a particular individual, then that individual should not be credited with authorship" (Committee on Publication Ethics, 2003, p. 70). Some journals now request that authors affirm their contributions in writing, although this information rarely appears in print (Albert & Wager, 2003).

In the end, judgments about "substantial contributions" fall to authors and those who think they deserve authorship. Authorship disputes are best avoided by clear communication at the outset of the project (Albert & Wager, 2003). Trusting authorship to collegial goodwill has ended many a promising partnership. Authorship should always be negotiated when the project is conceived and, as suggested by Albert and Wager, combined with documented agreements about project assignments and deadlines. It is advisable to keep a running list of acknowledgments as well, listing those non-authors who deserve recognition for specific contributions.

There is no limit to the number of authors that can be included. The order of authors, however, is understood to designate that the first author did the most work, followed, in order, by succeeding authors. It is not uncommon to designate one's mentor as the last author, although to meet ICMJE guidelines, that individual must qualify for authorship.

Authors assume responsibility for form and content of the final manuscript (Committee on Publication Ethics,

2003) and a number of journals require signatures from each author to affirm their responsibility. Whereas a potential author can withdraw his or her name prior to publication, authorship disputes raise warning flags for the editorial team; it is clearly best to resolve disputes before submission.

Negotiating authorship at a project's outset based on published authorship guidelines ensures that all contributors will be appropriately acknowledged. Authorship in a professional journal stands as a symbol of scholarship and ethical conduct. Much as the old adage states a man's word is his bond, authors' names are their bonds, affixing a stamp of approval on the publication and affirming their contributions.

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References

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