

FEATURE



ACADEMIC AUTHORSHIP

Time to kill the scientific “author”?

The scourge of ghost writing seems to be diminishing while the problem of guest authorship is growing. Is it time to rethink the system? **Ben Adams** reports

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Controversies over the role of the author in science publishing come in waves. Back in the 1990s and early 2000s the phenomenon of ghost writing was a dominant concern. Aspenberg’s troubling account shows that the problem persists.¹ But today, guest authorship, where someone who made little or no contribution to a piece is a named author, is even more pervasive, some experts say. “This includes those who simply insist that they have their name in the article,” explains Elizabeth Wager, former chair of the Committee on Publication Ethics. “It’s a career limiting move not to put the head of department’s name on when they ask, for instance—or it could be a senior person who has been asked in order to make an article appear more authoritative.

“Or it could just be a friend who needs a few more publications attached to their name,” she adds. Funders often want big academic names attached to their studies so even if professors have delegated all the work, there is financial pressure to put their name in lights.

Wager points to an observational study of “prolific authors” that she worked on which found one author named on a paper once every 10 days.²

So what is being done to clean up this opaque method of assigning authorship? And is it time to rethink the system?

Rise of the prestige economy

Guidelines on authorship from the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) attempt to define the role of authors and contributors. They recommend that authorship be based on having made “substantial contributions” to the work and had final approval over the published version.

Over 500 journal editors worldwide have signed up to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) to try to define better ways to evaluate research output. But ultimately, editors have no power to control how authors are listed on papers or to check if those deserving credit have been fairly credited. Only scientists do.

Elizabeth Wager says: “I’ve seen fights over ordering of names,” because of the unwritten rule that being first on a paper makes

that author more important than the others. At the same time, Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, says that there is a danger that junior researchers who have made a major contribution to the research can be excluded, especially if they come from low income countries. “However, I blame this on appointments and promotion panels,” he adds, which “obsess” over the number of papers a scientist has published and how high up their name appears in the list of authors.

End of authors?

Daniel Paul O’Donnell, professor in the department of English at the University of Lethbridge in Canada, has a radical solution: “In the 21st century, science is no longer an individual pursuit; it is a collaborative effort that can involve thousands of scientists across many disciplines. But calling each of these people an author is simply incorrect.” Those who contribute to research being published should be called participants, he says, rather than authors and everyone involved—including patients—should be named on each research paper with their contributions next to their names. The participants system, much like the rolling credits at the end of a film, should not favour one scientist over another.

“We would not create the concept of the scientific author as a credit metric if it did not already exist. Now that it is causing serious trouble, it is time to kill it off,” says O’Donnell.

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

- 1 Aspenberg P. How I was nearly duped into “authoring” a fake paper. *BMJ* 2015;351:h6605.
- 2 Wager E, Singhvi S, Kleinert S. Too much of a good thing? An observational study of prolific authors. *PeerJ* 2015;3:e1154.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;351:h6560

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