

How Honorable Are Honorary Authors?

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Those familiar with South Korea's recent political landscape will probably have noticed a change in how shady past behavior concerning academic publishing is regarded in those occupying or aspiring for high-ranking official positions. During the last few years, many a promising or prominent political figure's career has been hamstrung or even destroyed by allegations of inappropriate authorship or plagiarism of research papers, degree dissertations or textbooks written several years to decades ago. In some incidents the incriminated author is not the public official him/herself but one of his/her children, with the charges pointing to the political figure parent exercising power to grant academic achievements to an unqualified young person who did not actually participate as an author.

Until recently, most, if not all, of such allegations would at most end as only a mild embarrassment to the accused, who would be defended by colleagues saying that such actions "were customary in the past" and that "everyone did it." The general public, regarded to be unfamiliar with academic practices, would soon forget the scandalous accusations, and the accused would go on with his/her political career.

Not so anymore. Whether this change in how politicians and public officials' past academic activities are judged is a result of a public increasingly enlightened in research and publication ethics or mere political infighting may be a matter of debate, but these winds of change probably are rooted to some degree in the stricter ethical standards in academic research and publication that have been implemented in almost all fields. Medicine is no exception, and the *Journal of Wound Management and Research* (JWMMR) also endeavors to adhere to the ethical guidelines described by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) [1].

Arguably paramount among these ethical guidelines is the definition of authorship credit. As one can expect, inappropriate authorship (including both "honorary" and "ghost" authorship) with its consequential lack of transparency and accountability is also a major area of academic publishing misconduct [2]. This publishing editor posits that, in the eyes of someone whose job is to not only select but also help authors improve and polish manuscripts for publication, "honorary," "guest," or "gift" authors (persons named as authors despite not having satisfied proper authorship criteria) are more problematic than "ghost" authors (persons who have made substantial contributions to the manuscript fulfilling all authorship requirements but who are not named as authors) because they do not contribute to the quality of a manuscript except by gracing it with the presence of their name.

According to ICMJE and JWMMR guidelines, authorship credit should only be based on "(1) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; (2) drafting or revising the article critically for im-

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portant intellectual content; (3) final approval of the version to be published; (4) agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. Authors should meet all of these four conditions” [1,3]. All proper authors should have written or revised at least a significant part of the manuscript and should be accountable for questions on the quality of the work; this obviously implies that with several accomplished and senior co-authors, the manuscript would not contain any glaring errors or shortfalls.

It is not too rare to come upon a manuscript co-authored by several persons including some senior members, that at first glance offers an appealing new idea with good data and fine analyses, but when thoroughly read presents with large gaps in the argument and logic. Other manuscripts are filled with sentences and passages that fail to convey half of what the authors intended. I do not doubt that the actual writer of the sentences had a very good idea of what he/she was communicating; the only problem was that readers of the same sentences could not grasp the same idea. In both cases, if all of the stated co-authors had actually fulfilled the criteria for authorship, someone would probably have discovered and mentioned that a crucial part of the argument was missing or that the writing was incomprehensible. If the manuscript was authored by only one or two people, these kinds of errors are more understandable, but six or more authors (including some accomplished and senior professors) should guarantee a certain degree of composition and argument, if not quality and quantity of data.

Such honorary authors who do not actually fulfill authorship criteria have probably been included as authors for many different reasons [2,4]. However, from an editor's point of view, the lack of such honorary authors' actual participation in the composition of the manuscript can undermine the quality of the work, rendering it inferior to its full potential. Leaving aside the issue of receiving unwarranted credit, why would anyone want their name to be attributed to something that was not as good as it could have been?

Sometimes the corresponding author of a manuscript does not fulfill the role of the corresponding author, which is to take “primary responsibility for communication with the journal during the manuscript submission, peer review, and publication process” [3]. To put it simply, these corresponding authors do not correspond, and are the Editorial Office's nightmare. JWMR's electronic submission system automatically relays all notifications concerning the progress of each manuscript to

the corresponding author. Notwithstanding, there have been instances when, several weeks after the review results had been notified to the corresponding author, the primary author contacts the Editorial Office asking why the peer review was taking so long. In other cases the primary or secondary author specifically requests all notifications concerning manuscript progress to be sent to him/herself instead of to the corresponding author. While the corresponding author may freely delegate manuscript administrative requirements to one or more co-authors, they should at least maintain the role of communication gateway with the Editorial Office. If this role is not retained, then that person should no longer be the corresponding author.

It is not an easy task to distinguish between “real” and honorary authors of any given manuscript; attempting to do so can also touch some sensitive personal or political issues. However, all clinicians, researchers and academicians should keep in mind that medical research and publication ethical guidelines were established because medical publications can significantly influence clinical practice. This is why manuscript authorship must be honest and transparent. The practice of granting honorary authorship, which is by no means honorable, should be banished. All persons associated with medical research and publishing should participate in this endeavor in the name of professional ethics and best patient care.

Conflict of interest

Hyonsurk Kim is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Wound Management and Research*. No other potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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