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# GIFT AUTHORSHIP PRACTICES – HISTORY, TRENDS AND REMEDIES

Saba Sohail

Published research represents a segment of a vast canvas of scientific research and development culture in a country.<sup>1</sup> It does not necessarily reflect the impact on development. The editors of the research-disseminating periodicals contribute to this segment best by maintaining a high quality of the published material—material which should have sufficient validity and credibility. In fact, it is one of an editor's myriad responsibilities to explicitly define and implement ethical principles, authorships, conflicts of interests etc.<sup>2</sup>

Publication of research serves multiple purposes. On one hand, it disseminates timely new information to the practitioners of the disciplines, and on the other hand it serves as a dependable tool for recognition of merit. It ubiquitously opens the door to obtain research grants, jobs, promotions, tenures, referrals and above all prestige.<sup>3</sup>

The brownie point system centers on the publications achieved by a scientist so that a scientist's or researcher's esteem and career progression has become intimately linked to the number of credited research publications. PMDC also follows a point system tailored according to the type of publication (full paper, evidence based report, letter to the editor etc.) and the order in which an author's name appears in the list of contributors or co authors – the first three authors of a research article getting full 10 points for a paper, the next two lesser and so on. Point's allocation for evidence-based reports and 'letters to editor' is proportionately less.

However, it raises the much vexed yet the all-important question. What determines the authorship credit and order? In other words, what is the individual contribution to a multi-author manuscript for deserving a particular number of points and the immeasurable reputation?

Traditional guidelines have existed since long. The West began to realize the impact of the undeserved authorship bestowed upon colleagues without significant (or any) contribution in the 1980's. Authorship criteria were first laid down in 1985 which basically stressed upon the substance of involvement and the responsibility for the work. Those guidelines were later expanded by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). Again the main authorship themes were based on substantial contributions to conception of research, analysis of data, critical drafting or revision of its intellectual content and the final approval of the submitted version. These tasks were later re-defined and expounded in two landmark conferences – first in Nottingham in 1996 and second in Berkely in 1998. The latter was followed by the formation of the Authorship Task Force.

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Received: December 1, 2005.

In 1992, an important survey by Shapiro *et al.* unearthed that out of the 200 research papers published in 10 leading western basic sciences and clinical journals, 26 % of the total authors had not contributed substantially to the intellectual tasks.<sup>4</sup> Yet respondents of a survey had no objection to assign undeserved authorship on others if it facilitates publication or promotion of the former's career.<sup>5</sup> The reasons usually put forward for bestowing gift authorship include the custom of naming the Head of Department as a co-author in every research paper brought forward from the group; pragmatism and bartering with colleagues (for grants, technical aid, data handling) is the other reason and we have observed kinship as another. Yet an interesting survey at Netherland discovered that authorship was mostly in accordance with ICMJE criteria although many authors were not aware of it.<sup>6</sup>

But what's wrong with the practice? Is it really a poisoned chalice?<sup>3</sup> The truth of the matter is that gift authorship devalues the credibility of the publication. The quality of a journal depends upon its contributors and the nature and standard of their contributions. Citing some unpublished, regretted submissions to the JCPSP, what will be the credibility of an oncology management report from outside Pakistan when the co-author is a recently graduated family practitioner in a suburban locality of a Pakistani metropolis? Same is the case when the co-author of a manuscript on biliary malignancies management happens to be a neurosurgeon. The criteria imposed for writing review articles are even stricter. Only a person who has sufficient background of research and authority can write a review article, which is an in-depth critical analysis of a topic and should, therefore, have done enough research on the subject. A review article is not just a complication of nicely collected notes but an extension of personal research and experience-based thoughts.

The JCPSP strictly follows the authorship contribution criteria laid down by the CSE (Council of Science Editors), which include concept (framing the hypothesis); study design and experimental work; resources procurement; material provision; data collection and processing; statistical analysis and interpretation; literature search; manuscript preparation; critical review and other novel contributions.<sup>2</sup> The measure adopted by leading western Journals is to publish as a foot note the type and extent of individual author's contribution against the name. This contribution must satisfy the intellectual criteria laid out above. We at JCPSP, do ask our contributors about the nature and extent of contribution when the authors are too many and belong to apparently un-related institutes disciplines and metropolises.

The question of reputation is a double edged sword for journal editors as well as authors. The quality of a journal determines the quality of submission made and vice versa. It is indeed

heartening to note that our contributors are changing trends and debating such thought-provoking ethical predicaments as on "gift authorship" published in this particular issue of the journal. The international Authorship Task Force is interested in hearing from the rest of us at the CSE's Forum on Authorship.

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