

Teaching ECR about Ethical Authorship

Examining honorary and ghost
authorship

Jane Barnsteiner, PHD, RN, FAAN
Professor Emerita, School of Nursing,
University of Pennsylvania

Who Is An Author?

- Substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data
- Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content
- Final approval of the version to be published
- “All persons designated as authors should qualify for authorship, and all those who qualify should be listed.”

Inappropriate Authorship

- Honorary Author (Guest Author)
 - Does not meet author criteria but is so named
- Ghost Author
 - Made contributions that merit authorship but is not named

Nursing Journals - Empirical Data

- Editors informally reporting inappropriate authors.
- Authors identify that faculty or supervisors expect to be co-authors.
- Authors identify “assistance” from paid professional writers.
- Authors fail to disclose writing assistance and it is discovered surreptitiously.

Kennedy, M.S., Barnsteiner, J. & Daly, J. (2014)
Honorary and ghost authorship in nursing publications.
Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 46(6), 416-422.

- Assess prevalence of honorary and ghost authors in nursing journals in 2010 - 2012
- Compare prevalence of honorary and ghost authors in nursing journals with the prevalence reported by authors of articles published in high impact biomedical journals.

Nursing vs Medical Journals

Medical Journals	JAMA	Cochrane
• Honorary authors	17.6%	39%
• Ghost authors	7.9%	9%

Nursing Journals

(10 journals, 3 years, research, QI, review articles, n= 556)

- Honorary authors 42%
- Ghost authors 27.6%

Themes

1. Lack of awareness around rules for authorship
2. Need for debate, discussion and promotion of ethical practice
3. Knowingly tolerating, and sometimes deliberately promoting transgressions in practice
4. Power relations and expectations

Lack of Awareness Around Rules for Authorship

For all publications, need for:

- Mentoring/supporting through a systematic recognised system
- *Order of authorship is very confusing for new authors and academics who have to learn from others/by mistakes*
- Clear consistent guidelines for who is an AUTHOR and who should be ACKNOWLEDGED.

Acknowledged Need for Debate, Discussion and Promotion of Ethical Practice

- Disparity between colleagues' authorship expectations.
- Some authors don't do much- authorship criteria should be better discussed
- Important to agree about authorship at outset of the work
- *Unfortunately in medical science everybody thinks it is normal to be listed as co-authors even though they did not do anything but recruiting participants or read the manuscript once. I had terrible fights with my supervisor over this.*

Knowingly Tolerating and Sometimes Deliberately Promoting Transgressions in Practice

- Some included as authors on the basis of allowing access to patients
- Some can't write but must publish so they employ writing assistants to do the bulk of the writing
- *Gift authorship is a problem that is not going to go away whilst heads of depts view their major role as obtaining funding but nothing else*

Power Relations and Expectations

- Some senior investigators expect to be listed as last author at times simply because the work was undertaken in their lab/unit.
- Dissertation chair told the student she had a right to authorship on any article from the dissertation, also who to include as the third author.
- *It's very common in many research groups to be put as an author in a fellow researcher's manuscript without hardly any contribution at all. It's an 'I help you and you help me' unspoken agreement that is driven by the professor to get the most academic credits out of the group.*
- *It is difficult as an employee of an academic institution, when your direct supervisor demands authorship despite having very little input.*

Going Forward

- Healthcare journals need to adhere to and publicize criteria on authorship & *include in author guidelines*.
- Editors need to include standards in writing workshops.
- Academic leaders, scholars and educators need to model and promote ethical behavior to assure the integrity and trustworthiness of content and that information is free from bias and conflicts of interest.