

Authorship associated misconduct - a rising problem in Nepalese medical academia

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A medical practitioner or researcher's contribution is judged not only on the basis of number of patients treated or the years of practice, but also, through publications. It is through your publications, your work is validated and the lifelong techniques is disseminated to your juniors, fellows, residents and even to your colleagues. Publishing also is a source for academic development and a means to enrich yourself by critically reviewing others works. In addition, your publication provides the research-gap for future researchers to conduct additional studies. In many countries including Nepal, publication is also a basis of promotion in academics. So, research, scientific writing and publishing is a part of medical and dental academia.¹

The happiest moment for any medical practitioners and researchers is getting your work published in prestigious journals around the world. To come to this stage of publication, the scientific work has to undergo a series of rigorous process. Conceiving any study, searching the gap, discussing with peers, writing the proposal for ethical clearance

are the initial stages. After obtaining the ethical clearance the proposal undergoes several months of data collection, experimentation and analysis. The last process is the scientific writing and sending the manuscript for publication. Any research should also maintain academic integrity and research ethics.² Any study with significant findings, done by maintaining the biomedical ethics, written in an organized way have more chances for acceptance for publication.² However, in the line of publication, the issues of scientific misconduct are also rising. Over the past 5 years working on several journals as an editor, some shocking presentation of violation of authorship has been observed in Nepalese medical academia. The main reasons may be "publish or perish" pressure, lack of knowledge on biomedical ethics, the poor writing skills.³ A well written case report with eight to nine authors simply adds more doubt to journal editor whether all authors were needed to simply write a case report. Had they all contributed in all part of the case report?

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Was this an issue of author inflation? In this era of collaborative research, when academia and researchers in Nepal have not even thought of collaborative research, we often receive manuscript with authors in dispersed locations around the world making it doubtful on the role of each author. Basically, we do not realize who the authors should be. As defined by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), to become an author in any article, the person should meet all of the following criteria: (1) substantial contributions to conception or design of the work or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work, (2) drafting of the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content (3) final approval of the version to be published and (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.⁴ An individual seems to become an author without any significant contribution in the manuscript leaving behind the guidelines defined by ICMJE.⁴ The inclusion of colleagues, members of family members are mostly observed. On the contrary, at times, we do not even acknowledge our statistician and put all the authors contribution in statistical analysis.

INAPPROPRIATE AUTHORSHIP

Two categories of inappropriate authorship exist in academia. The honorary or undeserved authorship, and ghost authorship.⁵ The honorary authorship has been further described in three different forms: gift authorship, guest authorship and coercive authorship.⁶ Gift authorship is a practice of providing authorship to someone who have not contributed to the study in any form. They are generally supervisors, department chairs, senior researchers or other colleagues with an intent to get any favour back in future in the form of being named a gift author themselves in another article or getting attention for promotion. Few of the gift authors are not concerned with authors bylines and ask to put the names wherever possible. Other types of gift authors demand even first authorship, creating confusion among main authors. Some of the gift authors

hatch their own rules within the department for the authorship, by misusing their position. Issues of honorary authorship especially the gift authorship is rising in Nepal.^{5,6}

Another type of authorship referred as guest authorship is most commonly done by adding a well-known name in the manuscript to increase the quality of paper. The author also hope the addition of the additional name increase the chance of acceptance by the Journal.⁷ Coercive authorship occurs when due to pressure from seniors to be included as author knowing that the junior may not protest.^{1,6} Ghost authorship refers to the tradition of omitting the names of person who has done a major part of the published work. The person may be a junior colleague or student. They may also be an employee of pharmaceutical company who have done significant contribution on the paper but naming the person might raise conflict of interest.^{5,8}

Whenever a manuscript is submitted to a journal, all the authors are equally responsible and accountable to the content of the manuscript. At times, few of the coauthors have been observed to be unaware of the results achieved. On occasions, the corresponding author responds the questions raised on the manuscript. However, the sending the queries to the other authors or asking for their input or even the sending the revised draft to the authors is never done.

In order to minimize the inappropriate authorship issues, it is important to report transparently the contribution of all authors in a particular paper. In order to avoid problems with authorship issues, the journal editor should screen the authorship agreement letter before sending the manuscript to review.⁹ Another problem encountered is addition of author in a manuscript and changing the order of the authors after submission to the journal.⁹ Such changes should be known to all the authors and they all should sign the consent, including the author whose name was either added or deleted. In an attempt to avoid such issues associated with authorship, awareness should be increased among the medical practitioners and researchers about the ICMJE guidelines. All the journals should check the authorship letter too.

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