

Spurious authorship

This month's installment of *Pharmacy Ethics* (pages 2082-5) involves the bestowal of author status on someone who has devoted no intellectual effort to the preparation of a manuscript. As is usually the case in *Pharmacy Ethics* scenarios, it is not obvious how the protagonist should handle the situation. One thing, however, should be clear: According to standards used by most biomedical publishers,¹ the claim to authorship is invalid. Although the discussion (in which positions were assigned) contains skillful arguments for granting author status, the requirement for the designation—sufficient participation in the work to take public responsibility for the paper's content—is absent.

Compared with other forms of author misconduct, naming undeserving persons as authors seems benign. After all, a paper whose only blemish is a dubious list of authors will probably not mislead readers into making inappropriate decisions, as a paper with fabricated data might. The practitioners of spurious authorship might argue that for all of its potential rewards—career advancement, ego gratification, paid trips to scientific meetings—there is no harm done.

But there is harm, and perhaps authors themselves are hurt the most. Authors who conscientiously play by the rules find that spurious authorship trivializes what has been a precious and hard-earned title. Furthermore, the well-deserved reputation of authors as a trustworthy lot is eroded when readers suspect that the author designation is being misused. And if authors are less than frank about who really wrote a paper, how honest are they about the paper's actual content?

Spurious authorship affects others as well. It vexes journal readers by obscuring the contributions of purported authors and by making literature searches more cumbersome. It complicates the evaluation of candidates' publications by employers and promotion committees.

For publishers, authorship inflation magnifies the work of editing, proofreading, abstracting, and indexing papers and consumes time that could be devoted to improving manuscripts and publishing them more quickly. It is, admittedly, the job of publishers to accommodate the large

and apparently growing number of deserving authors. We are glad to do so; we simply do not need the extra work created by the naming of undeserving ones.

Authorship decisions are rightfully the domain of authors, but what can editors do to help ensure that authorship claims are legitimate? All persons named as authors in ASHP's journals must certify that their contributions meet our criteria for authorship; other journals impose a similar requirement. When the number of authors seems excessive, we ask the corresponding author to reconfirm that all named authors truly deserve the designation. Other journal editors tell us that they sometimes quiz the secondary authors of a manuscript over the telephone to gauge what those authors really know about the paper's content. It would not be fair for editors to use such a practice to make unilateral decisions about removing authors, but inability to answer the questions posed might shame some individuals into relinquishing their claim to authorship. Arbitrary limits could be set on the number of authors per paper, but this would be unfair as well. Since editors do not have the means, mandate, or desire to investigate and determine authorship for each accepted paper, authors must generally be relied on to do the right thing.

Authors can help themselves meet this responsibility by learning and using the accepted definition of authorship^{1,2} and by deciding, even before beginning to write, who the authors will be and the sequence in which names will appear. They should encourage high standards of ethical behavior in their colleagues. They should seek to remove or modify the primary influences, such as publish-or-perish requirements, that foster author misconduct. They should use a manuscript's acknowledgment section to recognize persons who have assisted in the work but have not qualified for authorship.

Authors are at once the best and the worst persons to designate authorship—best because most really do know who deserves the title, and worst because their judgment can be swayed by self-interest. Let us hope that the trust we are compelled to grant them continues to be earned as well.

1. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. *JAMA*. 1993; 269:2282-6.
2. American Society of Hospital Pharmacists. Procedure for submission of manuscripts to journals published by the American Society of Hospital Pharmacists. *Am J Hosp Pharm*. 1993; 50:134-5.

Guy R. Hasegawa