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Multiple authorship of manuscripts

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J Bone Joint Surg Am. 1989;71:639-640.

This information is current as of January 21, 2010

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Publisher Information

The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery
20 Pickering Street, Needham, MA 02492-3157
www.jbjs.org

The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery

American Volume

VOLUME 71-A, No. 5

JUNE 1989

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Editorial

Multiple Authorship of Manuscripts

In December 1987, an Editorial regarding the responsibilities of authors was published in The Journal⁴. The Editorial noted that the British Volume of The Journal had decided to include, in its "Guide to Authors", the phrase "not normally more than six" as a recommendation for the number of authors for a manuscript. It also suggested that authors have certain responsibilities. In brief, these responsibilities include: participation in the planning of the study, participation in the accumulation and review of the data, and participation in the writing of the manuscript. Moreover, each author is responsible for the content of the manuscript and for ensuring its accuracy. In order to fulfill these obligations, each author must read the manuscript before it is submitted for publication. The Editorial also noted that the number of authors per manuscript had been increasing over the years. The trend continued during 1988, more than thirty manuscripts published in the American Volume of The Journal having listed six authors or more. The first three issues in 1989 contained more than ten manuscripts with this number of authors, including two manuscripts that listed eleven authors.

The problem is not unique to The Journal. As early as 1957, Hewitt suggested: "The reader of a report issued by two or more authors has a right to assume that each author has some authoritative knowledge of the subject, that each contributed to the investigation, and that each labored on the report to the extent of weighing every word and quantity in it." In 1979, Relman suggested that being listed as an author of a manuscript should denote that the individual so listed has played a major role in the conception and design of the study and is also responsible for the analysis and the interpretation of the results. He suggested that a scientific paper is a creative achievement and that coauthorship should imply that the individuals who are listed as authors had been part of that creative process. He noted that "the use of coauthorship as a kind of payment for faithful technical assistance or data collection violates this principle. So does the all too common practice of adding the chief's name to every paper published from his department or laboratory, regardless of whether he has made any intellectual contribution" to the work.

In 1982, Huth⁷ suggested the following guidelines: "1. An author should have participated in the initiating or planning of a study or have assented to its design if enlisted late in the study. 2. An author should have made some of the reported observations or generated some of the data. 3. An author should have participated in interpreting the observations or data and deriving from them the reported conclusions. 4. An author should have taken part in the writing in the paper. 5. An author should have read the entire contents of a paper and assented to its publication before it is sent to a journal". In the same year, Burman reviewed the number of authors per manuscript for papers published in *Annals of Internal Medicine* and *The New England Journal of Medicine* and noted that, while the mean number of authors per manuscript in *The New England Journal* in 1930 was 1.2 ± 0.1 , this number increased in 1969 to 3.8 ± 0.3 and in 1979, to 5.2 ± 0.4 . Similar findings were noted for *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Burman suggested that editors of journals require that the transmittal letter contain a statement that "all authors contributed to either planning, doing, or analyzing the study or writing the paper".

Lancet addressed this issue in 1982, noting: "Perhaps the least to be expected of authors is that they have participated in and contributed to the published study, that they have read the paper to which they have put their names, and that within the limits of their skills they are prepared to vouch for the work"¹. In 1986, Huth⁸, in a position paper discussing guidelines on authorship of medical papers, suggested: "Participation must include three steps: (1) conception or design

of the work represented by the article, or analysis and interpretation of the data, or both; (2) drafting the article or revising it for critically important content; and (3) final approval of the version to be published”.

The number of authors per manuscript has been addressed in the lay press as well. The problem was mentioned by Wade in “The Unhealthy Infallibility of Science”, in *The New York Times* in June 1988. Wade noted, for example, that “Researchers who want to pad their résumés with long lists of mediocre articles can easily evade the present quality control system.” He cited the case of Robert Slutsky, a researcher who “published papers at the extraordinary rate of one every ten days, many in leading journals. Instead of questioning his remarkable productivity, his colleagues happily shared in the credit by letting him add their names to these works.” Wade suggested that editors discourage honorary authorship by requiring that each author’s contribution be stated in detail in a footnote.

In a lighter vein, Davis and Gregerman suggested the use of parse analysis, a system based on the assignment of decimals to each author of a manuscript to reflect his or her contribution to the manuscript. Their own article listed Paul J. Davis, M.D., 0.92, and Robert I. Gregerman, 0.08. Many manuscripts would follow this same pattern, with one individual, having done most of the work, receiving the largest decimal, and the remainder of the authors receiving small portions indeed. How the decimals would be allocated to the 257 authors of a manuscript noted by *Science*² has not been determined.

After careful consideration, two decisions have been made regarding the authorship of manuscripts to be published in the American Volume of *The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*. First, beginning in July of this year, the Instructions to Authors will suggest that usually no more than six authors be listed on a manuscript. If more than six authors are listed, when the manuscript is submitted for publication the authors will be asked to include a Letter of Transmittal stating how each author has contributed to the manuscript. Normally, individuals who contributed to only one segment of the manuscript or who only contributed cases should be credited in a footnote, unless extenuating circumstances prevail. If this is the situation, the Letter of Transmittal should detail why the authors have taken exception to the recommendations. It is to be clearly understood that each individual who is listed as an author has participated in the design of the experiment, normally has contributed to the collection of the data, has participated in the writing of the manuscript, and assumes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Second, authors will be asked to include in the Letter of Transmittal a sentence stating: “Each of the authors represent that he, or she, has read and approved the final manuscript.” Only when all authors participate in the preparation of a manuscript and assume responsibility for its contents can the reader be assured of the validity of that manuscript.

Henry R. Cowell, M.D., Ph.D.
Editor

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