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Ending Honorary Authorship

CREDIT FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS MUST BE CLEARLY AND APPROPRIATELY ASSIGNED at the time of publication. This task has become increasingly complicated because of the number of different laboratories and coauthors involved in many studies. The good news is that academic institutions, funders, and publishers are exploring new ways to clarify attribution,* and many publishers now require disclosure of specific contributions for scientific authorship. As part of this effort, it is critical that the problem of honorary authorship be effectively addressed. According to a recent report, honorary authors were attached to 25% of research reports, 15% of review articles, and 11% of editorials published in six major medical journals in 2008.† It is time to end this practice.

A true author is someone who has made substantive intellectual contributions to a study and is responsible for a component of the work. Honorary authorship violates this central principle. Why then is it so frequent? In some cases, honorary authorship amounts to “coercive authorship,” in which a senior person informs a junior colleague that the senior person must be listed as an author, even though she/he did not contribute substantially—or at all—to the work. In other cases, the principal investigator may add the name of a prominent scientist in the field as a guest author in an attempt to boost the paper’s chance of publication. Both types of behavior have fraudulent aspects, distorting the ethical culture that is central to a healthy academic environment.

To discourage honorary authorship and ensure appropriate accountability for published results, many journals have updated their policies on authorship. For some (including *Science*), all authors must formally agree to be listed as authors, specify their contributions to the manuscript, and certify that they approve of its content and submission to the journal. But scientific journals could go even further by adding a statement on authorship forms that reminds authors of their accountability in the event of challenges to the veracity or integrity of the work, such as “By signing this statement, I acknowledge that I take credit for the content of the published work. I also acknowledge that I will take responsibility for the work if questions arise in the future as to its authenticity and credibility.” Such a statement would serve as a firm reminder that being inappropriately listed as an author has negative consequences if the results are challenged or retracted.

Research institutions should develop and promulgate clear statements in their research policies about the importance of upholding ethical standards of authorship. For example, Washington University in St. Louis‡ defines both guest and gift authorship as research misconduct, whereby “guest (honorary, courtesy, or prestige) authorship is defined as granting authorship out of appreciation or respect for an individual, or in the belief that expert standing of the guest will increase the likelihood of publication, credibility, or status of the work” and “gift authorship is credit, offered from a sense of obligation, tribute, or dependence, within the context of an anticipated benefit, to an individual who has not contributed to the work.” Each institution should also specify to whom concerns should be directed, without fear of retribution, when an author feels coerced to include an inappropriate author.

It is incumbent on more-senior coauthors to assist in educating their colleagues about the proper standards for authorship. But all scientists should take a stand against coercive authorship and refuse to comply with such behavior. In this way, senior faculty and mentors will serve as role models of best practices, reinforcing for more-junior investigators the importance of ensuring appropriate authorship. Honorary authorship must no longer be tolerated. Concerted efforts by institutions, authors, and journals are needed to put an end to this fraudulent and unethical practice.

– Philip Greenland and Phil B. Fontanarosa

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*http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/attribution_workshop. †J. S. Wislar *et al.*, *Br. Med. J.* 343, d6128 (2011).
‡<http://wustl.edu/policies/authorship.html>.

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