
Gift authorship - A cause for concern

Sir,

I would like to congratulate Sharma *et al.* for highlighting a very important issue regarding the ethics in medical writing.^[1] I have the following comments to offer.

In academic settings, decisions regarding promotion, tenure, and salary are heavily influenced by the number of publications in peer reviewed journals. Professionals with strong publication records are often considered to have more competence and expertise than their less published counterparts. This culture of "Publish or Perish" is largely responsible for the practice of plagiarism and unethical medical writing. Another important issue in ethical medical writing is authorship criteria and order. Authorship criteria in medical writing are an important issue and should be emphasized to researchers and especially postgraduate students. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) offers specific and clear guidelines for authorship. These are commonly used

by most scientific journals: "Authorship credit should be based on (1) substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; (2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions 1, 2, and 3".^[2] All contributors who do not meet the criteria for authorship should be listed in an acknowledgment section. The practice of giving *gift authorship* is widely prevalent in many institutions and has increased in recent years. *Gift authorship* is defined as co-authorship awarded to a person who has not contributed significantly to the study. There are several possible reasons for *gift authorship*. Junior researchers often feel pressured to accept or assign authorship to their senior co-workers who have substantial powers over their future career. In addition, junior researchers may believe that including more experienced colleagues as authors will increase their chances of publication. Senior investigators may give *gift authorship* for encouraging collaboration and

maintaining good working relations or as repayment for favors. Regardless of the cause, *gift authorship* is an unacceptable practice for academic publications. Authorship should not be presumed as a right based on status or mere association with a research project without substantial contribution. There are three reasons why *gift authorship* is regarded as unethical. First, a publication that is not genuinely earned may falsely represent the individual's expertise. Second, due to *gift authorship*, the person is perceived as being more skilled than his colleague who has not published. This gives the person an unfair advantage professionally over his colleague while applying for jobs or appearing for an interview or for promotion. Finally, such an individual is perceived to have a false level of competence and will be expected to accomplish tasks that may be outside the range of his expertise. In conclusion, *gift authorship* should be strongly discouraged in medical writing. The authorship credit and order should be based on the relative scholarly abilities and professional contributions of the collaborators.

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