

Editorial

Questionable coauthorship—an erosion of ethical standards

A disturbing trend in dental publications is the proliferation of questionable coauthors—those who have contributed only minimally, or not at all, to papers submitted for publication. While this matter has been of increasing concern in recent years—and while an attempt has been made at *Quintessence International* to discourage, even if we cannot prevent, the addition of names for reasons other than that of creative or scientific participation in a project—the problem remains. We must come to terms with the possibility that fraudulent addition of coauthors to papers is not preventable in today's society, where instances of ethical standards being compromised for selfish desires appear to be becoming more common.

The problem:

Papers are submitted for publication with many more authors than it could possibly take to complete a project. Colleagues soon to be considered for promotion and tenure at universities are probably the most frequently added, followed by technicians, assistants, and, who knows, even friends or spouses. Recently I noticed in a journal to which I subscribe—a journal published by an academy that values high ethical and clinical standards—a paper of minimal work, with inconsequential conclusions, “authored” by six people, each of whom had both DDS and PhD degrees. Naturally, they came from a university. I cringe when I see case reports or studies that could be completed in a day or two submitted to QI with five, six, or more authors listed. How can the work possibly be divided in so many ways?

It is rare that papers coming from private practitioners have an inordinate number of authors. It is our colleagues in academia who need to do some soul-searching as to the lax criteria they apply to the granting of coauthorship. What sort of message does it give to our students when they see such lack of scientific integrity in their teachers?

Why is the problem of concern?

This is a question that should not have to be asked. To claim credit for something in which one has not participated (and this is the touchy area, how do you define “participated”?) is simply wrong. It is fraudulent.

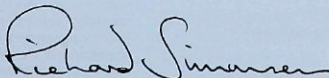
The solution:

Many people have proposed various solutions to the problem. They hinge on how one defines “participation” in a study or a paper. It is simple enough to have a clear conscience if one's definition of participation includes the person who typed the manuscript. One needs, however, to distinguish between directed work versus independent work. Directed work, which is part of one's normal employment and for which one is compensated (ie, work done by a technician) should not qualify for coauthorship. Surely, since lists of publications are used to judge an individual's productivity or merit, we should follow stringent criteria for participation on an author list. Recently I listened to a presentation on the criteria for qualifying as a “coauthor” on a patent application. These criteria have considerable application to coauthorship of scientific papers.

A coauthor for a patent application:

- needs to contribute to the final conception of that which is sought to be patented (published).
- is not just a “pair of hands.” (Directed versus independent work)
- must work together with the author.
- must work sequentially with the author, with the second author having knowledge of the work of the first.

We cannot mandate nor control ethical behavior. However, we can, and we should, set up some guidelines for coauthorship of published, peer-reviewed, papers. I can only hope that authors will do their part to omit those unqualified, or questionably qualified, colleagues or friends who would seek to take a share of the credit for work that is not theirs.



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