



Some random reflections on the equal co-first authorships

EJOI recently received requests from several authors asking whether they could share the status of first author. This request comes mainly from authors working in universities who wish to progress in their academic career. In order to achieve this they need to show a certain level of scientific production, which also takes into consideration the author position in the scientific publication presented for application. In fact, the first author position is obviously the most visible one because of the citation system and should be given to the author who contributed the greater part of the work. There are some situations in which the work has been shared in equal parts by two or more authors, so only one of these authors will benefit from the first position, relegating the others to the second position or as the honorary last position, usually given to the most senior and experienced authors. This new trend has been termed 'Equally Credited Authors' abbreviated ECA and denotes equal contribution of the first and/or last authors. Traditionally co-first authorships are indicated by an asterisk and the following sentence: '*these authors contributed equally to this work', meaning that all the authors marked with the asterisk should be considered as first authors.

Under the above-mentioned circumstances, several leading scientific journals decided to allow sharing of the first or last positions with two or more authors, sometimes reaching up to five ECAs. In this way authors are better rewarded and more likely to submit manuscripts to journals that have adopted this policy. Therefore both authors and journals mutually benefit from this 'innovative' trend. Obviously, everything would work out in the ideal world, but reality is usually a bit differ-

ent. Earning credits is a basic human need but in some predisposed superego subjects this may create some distortions. For instance it has been observed that some co-first authors in position 2, 3, 4 or 5 felt the right to swap the position as first author in their Curriculum Vitae. Essentially the little asterisk is used by many as a justification to twist the correct publication citation in their favour. This is unethical, since citations should be reported as they appear in the publications. In addition, some experienced assessors are not impressed, and are sometimes even irritated by those applicants who swapped their co-first authorships. I openly admit it, when I realise that a candidate has modified author citations for their own benefit, I immediately start having doubts that this researcher might have also considered adjusting the research outcome to fit their claims for validating the research.

Ethical integrity is a fundamental of scientific research and as soon as doubts emerge, the entire system loses credibility. Current scientific publications are already plagued by too many biases including the widespread sneaky practice of having several pseudo authors. Parasite authors are persons listed in the author list who never contributed in any way to the study and have not read the article bearing their name. Realising that this practice is also increasingly used, the combination of this with the ECA could make it even worse. This tendency could lead to an inability to identify the primary contributors of a specific study.

Science, as life in general, should be meritocratic and those who actually carried out the greater portion of the job should be praised first. I am perfectly aware that reality is different but I am not willing to accept a further loss of scientific credibility.

There are some other practical considerations which, in my opinion, do not favour the ECA trend: the first author will remain the one cited in the body of the text and a little asterisk alone may not be sufficient to make other researchers believe real equity exists between several first authors. Finally,

it is unlikely that PubMed will be able to change to reflect co-first authorship.

Please reflect about this matter and have a nice reading.

Marco Esposito

