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Commentary

Byline Corruption Can Only Be Controlled by True Stakeholders

Eugen Tarnow, PhD

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It is often a mystery as to why particular authors end up on the byline and others do not. Although there are conventions for byline order that are dependent on the subfield (head of the laboratory goes first or last; all authors go in alphabetical order, etc), there is plenty of evidence (see the literature^[1] and articles cited therein) that it is practically impossible to tell which author on a byline did the majority of the work, who came up with the brilliant ideas, and to whom we owe the biggest honors. In other words, the byline is often corrupt.

I am familiar with 3 authorship guidelines, guidelines that are supposed to limit bylines on research articles to only the essential authors. One of them is the guideline of the American Physical Society (APS), a professional organization of physicists. The other one is the "Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: Writing and Editing for Biomedical Publication." The third is a guideline constructed with survey feedback that seems superior to either of the other 2 to a population of pathologists. (This article states all 3 guidelines.^[1])

Here is a conjecture: The number of coauthors has not changed since guidelines came about. (According to Joost P. H. Drenth, an authorship researcher, unless the journal specifically limits the number of authors to a certain number, there seems to be no influence of authorship guidelines on the number of coauthors in medical journals.)

Here is another conjecture: The guidelines enable the byline corruption to keep going by convincing the uninformed that there is a standard for authorship.

The APS does not enforce its authorship guideline. (After 2 recent scandals involving fraudulent data,

the guideline was adjusted but not enforced on any of the authors or coauthors.) Brian Schwartz, the previous executive director of the American Institute of Physics, stated in a conversation that there is nobody assigned to enforcement, and there is no punishment that can be meted out. The Society does a poor job marketing it as well: Most postdoctoral fellows do not know that the guideline exists^[2] and they are not used in 92% of byline determinations.^[3]

The "Uniform Requirements" guideline, composed by editors, is unenforced as well. True, some journals will ask for each author to swear that some or all of the guideline is upheld. But no editor will adjust the byline, trimming it of authors who did not contribute sufficiently. (An informal request of members of the World Association of Medical Editors turned up one editor who had done it once.)

Another way to deal with authorship is to convert the byline into contributorship,^[4,5] with a detailed listing of just what each author's contributions were. However, this can easily deteriorate: Nobody is assigned to check the veracity of the contribution list, and the list can feature overly broad descriptions that become meaningless.

The fundamental problem with either authorship guidelines or contributorship standards is that they are set by bodies that have little stake in either appropriate authorship or contributorship. (But for some reason, these bodies nevertheless like to write them.) The editor's stake in bylines is that somebody takes responsibility for the accuracy of the claims made and that there are no copyright infringements; he or she does not need to worry about byline corruption. Professional societies like the APS are also not appropriate forums for authorship. They are run by senior scientists who are more commonly the recipients of gift authorship. (Authorship gifts are typically given to those of high stature rather than those of low stature.^[2,6]). The actors who have a stake in trimming bylines are neither scientific societies nor journal editors but rather include:

- The authors that have their authorship diluted by noncontributing authors, typically junior scientists; and
- The public who is giving out research grants on the basis of corrupt bylines.

Junior scientists have little power, so they cannot enforce authorship. Granting agencies employ senior scientists to distribute granting monies, making them inappropriate enforcers as well. Rafi Kleiman suggested in a conversation that gift authorship be thought of as prepublication plagiarism. And, indeed, a reading of the definition of plagiarism by the Office of Research Integrity would include gift authorship. Nevertheless, the Office of Research Integrity specifically avoids byline-corruption issues.

In other words, the only way to remove byline corruption and the current Hobbesian state of nature in authorship is if the public decides that fighting corruption in science is in its interest. This would then be writing into the legal code. After all, the value of a manuscript is about the value of a car, and undeservedly adding oneself to its title is, at least in my mind, grand larceny.

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Eugen Tarnow, PhD, Independent Researcher, Fair Lawn, New Jersey

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