

Anecdote from Editors Desk Anecdote 8-Whom to Ask if Not the Corresponding Author!

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The role of a researcher does not end once the experiment is over and rewarding results are accomplished. Primarily, the need to publish outcomes of a study came into being when the scientific community found it pertinent to share knowledge among peers. This dissemination of knowledge would then form the basis of further researches. However, this elementary need gave birth to other complicated issues like misconduct, data falsification, fabrication, plagiarism etc.

Thus, arose the requirement for scientists to acknowledge and take the onus of their work. Associations like COPE and ICMJE have laid well-accepted instructions, specifying criteria for authorship contribution. This helps categorise the roles and responsibilities of each author towards the manuscript as well as the research work.

It is expected that every contributing author is privy to the course of a research, its outcome and has substantially contributed to and consented to the manuscript that documents the research. However, seldom it happens that senior researchers lend their names just because they were part of the research team, having no or very less knowledge of the content of the documental version of the work. These manuscripts when reach a journal and the glaring flaws are brought to light, the senior-most author is usually (and rightfully so) made the convict.

This anecdote stems out of two experiences in which two Head of Departments (HoD) admitted of being part of individual ethical misconducts. The predicament for the editorial was that it was left with no option to put up the case of misconduct for an institutional enquiry. The first incident relates to a case report where the therapeutic outcome was falsified (morphed follow-up image). The editorial came to know about the wrongdoing and wrote to the HoD, also the corresponding author. He affirmed that such a patient had reported to the department but he had no knowledge about the treatment and outcome of the patient. When the handling physician (Post Graduate student) drafted an article based on the patient, as a 'norm' he added the HoD as the first author along with another Associate teacher of the department. As a resort, we deleted the morphed image and added a note that the patient could not be followed-up.

The second anecdote involves an even higher institutional authority. In this case, the Director of a medical institute (also the HoD) was found to have submitted an already published article (he shared authorship in both the papers). He wasted no time to reach us back when the Chief Editor wrote a stern mail showing disbelief on the conduct of a person holding a chair of authority in one of the most reputed medical education centers of the country. To our dismay, he denied having any information about the paper being published elsewhere. We did not prude further about the requirement of copyright without signing which a journal cannot publish a manuscript. If he did not sign this copyright how could the paper get published and if he did sign how can his memory fall short so fast? The manuscript was finally rejected and the authors barred from further submissions to the journal.

Next comes the question of setting up an investigation, which every journal wants to avoid. There are very high and strong limitations

beyond which the editorial cannot step forward to block such misconducts for good. Though there are accounts where higher institutions got involved and either imposed temporary embargo or levied high compensation on the researchers that were implicated of misconduct these occasions make up a very small part of the literary content and happen only in handful of the cases.

Research is mostly a collaborative effort. There can be a single primary investigator but it requires a team to put the whole study together and later get it published. Hence, scientific studies have multiple authors. The role and responsibility of each author would nonetheless vary. Often a multidisciplinary team collaborates for a study. Some journals have a strict policy wherein they require the authors to fill in a name for 'guarantor of data'. This saves the face of the publishing house when the ground becomes murky. There remains a scope to blame the person who stood as guarantor, in situations when ethical misconducts come into light. In this regard, the American Psychological Association suggests that first authors should be the guarantor [1].

Hussinger found that it is 38% more likely that the first authors are the ones responsible for any misconduct. Next in line come the corresponding authors who have a 14% share [2]. This further clarifies, the known but covert fact that, not all authors are equally responsible for any research fraud.

There is an opposing idea held by Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and All European Academies (ALLEA). These bodies recommend investigating all involved researchers in cases of malpractice [3]. Some researchers also share the same thought. Jeffery Kovac of the University of Tennessee says 'In cases of alleged scientific misconduct it is important to investigate the entire team to find out who is responsible' [4].

The irony is that, no matter how many bouncers we employ, there always remains a backdoor through which a fraudulent manuscript enters the editorial and often makes its way up and gets published. It is not sensible at all times to retract a published article justifying a fraud or 'probable' fraud. A journal is pushed to its extreme and it has to make some move to at least know what and to which extent the misconduct exists. There is no way to brush the matter off the editorial desk and get the article unpublished, neither would that be a 'good conduct' on the part of a journal.

Here comes the role of a corresponding author. Though there are guidelines to control authorship abuse, there is not much clarity on the share of responsibility that the corresponding author should bear.

Out-of-the-mould incidences occur where none of the laid principles and guidelines help and the editorial finds itself setting up its own court of law. How to resolve a case when the most senior author (also the corresponding author) says that he did not read the final draft of an article and does not want to take the blame? At times one or more among the authors just sign the copyright form and do not consider reading the manuscript before submitting it for publication. Shady data reflect adversely on the whole team of authors and not only the corresponding author. Even a grammatically faulty manuscript brings in bad reputation to the authors. The least that a

busy researcher, lending his name to an article, can do is proofread the manuscript.

The fact still remains unresolved as to who should be held responsible and whom the journal should approach when the departmental heads or the senior-most author takes no accountability or plays the role of a 'on paper' author? We strongly recommend that the veteran authors take up the initiative to ensure research integrity and read the final version of a manuscript before pushing it for publication.

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