

(2.2) Honorary authorship

You have recently completed a prospective study in which you explored the diagnostic performance of a novel PET tracer for staging lymphoma patients. You received substantial assistance in the image analysis and statistical evaluation from John, a graduate student in your department. John formally works in the lab of Dr. Brooks, a senior investigator within your department, who encouraged John to participate in your project. However, aside from the participation of one of her lab members, Dr. Brooks herself otherwise did not directly contribute to the specific project.

You complete a draft of the manuscript for this project and are planning to submit it shortly to a journal for potential publication. John informs you that he recently reported current status of the project to Dr. Brooks and remarks that she would appreciate being included as a co-author given the use of personnel from her lab. What ethical concerns would be raised by including her as a co-author?

Commentary

The International Council for Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) provides explicit criteria that an individual must meet to warrant inclusion as a study author: (1) substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; (2) drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; (3) final approval of the version to be published; and (4) agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. These criteria require that authors made substantial important contributions to the work and are able to take responsibility for the work as a whole.

Honorary authorship refers to inclusion of authors who, although potentially contributing to the work, do not meet these criteria. Honorary authorship is an issue of increasing concern among biomedical journals. In a survey of the first authors of four major radiology journals, Eisenberg et al. reported that 27.7% of respondents perceived that at least one author did not make sufficient contributions to merit authorship and that 50.3% indicated that at least one coauthor performed only “non-author” tasks based on ICMJE criteria. Medical faculty face intense pressure to actively publish, whether for promotion at their institution or for prestige and recognition within their field, potentially contributing to honorary authorship and substantial increases in the average number of authors per manuscript over time.

There are numerous contexts in which honorary authorship are prone to occur. These include inclusion as an author of one’s division or department chief out of respect, tradition, or even internal pressure, even though this individual did not substantially contribute to the project; an individual who served as a mentor or advisor to the project but did not make any substantial contribution to the work; an individual who solely provided technical editing of the final manuscript or another task of a limited scope; or an individual who provided funding or other resources but who did not meaningfully participate in the study design, data acquisition, interpretation, or other critical components of the work. In all of these instances, it would distort the contributions to the work and be unfair to the other authors to credit the described individual as an author as well. Alternatively, it may be appropriate to recognize contributions not meeting criteria for authorship through an acknowledgment. In such instances, the acknowledgment can indicate the specific contribution (i.e., supplying funding or manuscript review) of the recognized individual. An additional consideration is to structure the project from the outset in

order to provide an individual who provides a specific resource with an opportunity to play a more substantial role in the conduct of the project and thereby ultimately fulfill authorship criteria.

In the present case, while a member of Dr. Brooks's lab group participated in the project, she herself did not make substantial contributions to the work as described in the ICMJE criteria. Therefore, she should not be included as a study author. Her senior status within the department is also not a consideration in deviating from this stance. Dr. Brooks would in fact be at risk if included as an author given that she would then become accountable for any misconduct by any study author that may later be discovered. Given her lack of direct involvement in the project, she is unlikely to be in a position to be able to reliably assess the integrity of each author's contribution. John, as a trainee and member of Dr. Brooks's lab, should not be placed in the position of broaching the matter with her further. Rather, it is your role as the project's lead investigator to address the matter with Dr. Brooks. A respectful conversation can initially be sought in an effort to resolve the matter professionally.

References

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