

### **(2.3) Author approval of final submission**

You are thrilled to have just received a decision letter from a journal informing you that a recently submitted manuscript has been accepted for publication. You forward the acceptance letter to your co-authors and include a copy of the final version of the accepted manuscript for their records. However, you soon hear back from two of the co-authors who raise concerns after seeing this final version. Dr. Jones sees that she is listed as the fourth author and feels that this undervalues her contribution to the work, believing that she in fact warrants a second author position. She indicates that she had not been previously informed of the author order and of her position in the list. In addition, Dr. Smith indicates that he doesn't fully agree with a paragraph in the Discussion describing the clinical application of the study's findings. He notes that this paragraph is different from the most recent version of the paper that he had seen before submission, and that although the change may seem minor, he no longer agrees with the exact wording. Dr. Smith is concerned about having his name identified as a co-author of this work given the content of this paragraph that does not fully reflect his views. At the time of submission, you had clicked a box on the journal's submission website attesting that all authors had approved the final version of the manuscript. What alternate courses of action would have avoided the circumstances described in this case?

#### **Commentary**

One of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) authorship criteria is that the author has approved the final version of the manuscript. In the submission process, journals employ various mechanisms, whether through physical author signature or electronic verification, to confirm that this criterion has been met. The criterion is important given the significance of having one's name formally associated with a published work as an author. An individual who is identified as an author is held accountable for all aspects of the work, and it is important that the individual be able to fully evaluate the final work to be published and make a specific decision to be identified as an author.

In the case at hand, this criterion was not fulfilled for either Dr. Jones or Dr. Smith. Regarding Dr. Jones's concern, the author list, in terms of both which individuals are included as authors, as well as their order, is an important component of a submitted manuscript, along with the manuscript's scientific content. Therefore, all authors should be made aware of the author list prior to submission of the work, thereby having an opportunity to raise any concerns regarding who is included and their order. Authors should not first become aware of such information following acceptance of the work at which point it is typically too late to make any change in the event of a legitimate concern. The author would then be denied an opportunity to potentially address his or her concern, as would be possible if this information were provided before submission.

Regarding Dr. Smith's concern, it is common for multiple rounds of edits to a manuscript to occur leading up to final submission. Even in the setting of such edits, it remains important for authors to see and approve the final version of the manuscript to be submitted. Simply having approved an initial draft does not guarantee approval after subsequent rounds of edits given the possibility that even a subtle or nuanced change may result in an author no longer endorsing the final content. Therefore, once all edits have

occurred, the updated manuscript draft should again be circulated to the authors, providing the group the opportunity to review the most updated version and provide a final approval before submission.

In the case at hand, you should have provided the authors an updated version of the manuscript, reflecting all edits and including the full author order, prior to submission. This step would have allowed both Dr. Jones and Dr. Smith to voice their concerns at a time when such concerns could be readily addressed. Following final acceptance, the authorship order generally cannot be changed, precluding Dr. Jones from having her concern taken into consideration. Regarding Dr. Smith's concern, it may be possible to contact the journal and ask if an additional edit can be made to the article, along with an explanation for why this change is being requested following acceptance. Such a request would be unusual for a journal to receive. If allowing the requested change to be considered, then the journal reserves the right to have the manuscript once again be sent for peer review and to potentially withdraw the earlier acceptance if such withdrawal is now felt to reflect the appropriate outcome following the change.

Finally, at the time of submission, you had provided a misrepresentation when attesting that all authors had approved the final version of the manuscript. Some journals use a process whereby this attestation is provided by each author individually, rather than by the submitting author. If such a system had been in place for this journal and Dr. Smith and Dr. Jones both individually chose to confirm their final approval of the manuscript at the time of submission, then such direct attestation would greatly diminish their later ability to express concerns regarding the content of the accepted version.

## References

- 1) AMA Manual of Style Committee. AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors (10<sup>th</sup> edition). Oxford University Press, March 2017.  
<http://www.amamanualofstyle.com/view/10.1093/jama/9780195176339.001.0001/med-9780195176339-chapter-5> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 2) International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors.  
<http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html> Accessed: December 23, 2015.
- 3) Berquist TH. The Copyright Transfer Agreement Key Points. AJR 2015;204(3):461-2.
- 4) Berquist TH. Authorship: what should concern you? AJR 2014;202(1):1.
- 5) Berquist TH. The copyright transfer agreement: we sign it, but do we understand it? AJR 2009;192(4):848-51.