

(2.4) Author verification forms

You are in the process of finalizing an original research manuscript for submission. The project was a lengthy one, requiring collaboration from colleagues in a number of other departments within your institution, and you are eager to now submit the work. You believe that time may be of the essence given awareness that other institutions are performing research in a similar topic and may be in the process of submitting their own findings for publication as well. The journal requires that the submission include a form physically signed by all authors attesting to their contribution to the work and specifically affirming their meeting the journal's authorship criteria. You have diligently sought out the various individuals who have contributed to the work and who will be included as the study's authors. However, you have been unable to reach Dr. Nelson, an author from another department at your institution, in order to sign the form, as your e-mail to him received an auto-reply that he is currently traveling without e-mail access. You speak with his administrative assistant, who offers to sign the form on his behalf. One of the other co-authors suggests that you simply sign the form yourself on Dr. Nelson's behalf. As you are confident that Dr. Nelson meets authorship criteria for the manuscript and would readily sign the form were he available, you contemplate having his name signed by yourself or by his assistant. What ethical concerns would doing so raise? What alternate approach could the journal adopt to circumvent this situation?

Commentary

Inclusion as an author carries important implications for an individual. The International Committee for Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) includes among its authorship criteria giving "final approval" of the manuscript as well as "agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work." Therefore, should any ethical issues or other concerns of scientific misconduct arise related to a published manuscript, all authors may be held accountable, even if the particular issue is not directly related to the individual author's primary contribution to the work. This accountability for the integrity of the entire work negatively impacts all authors, despite discovery of an ethical issue involving only a single aspect of the work. Thus, all individuals who identify themselves as an author must carefully consider whether they can attest to the integrity of the work of all of the other co-authors as well. Accordingly, attesting to be an author for a submitted manuscript should not be taken lightly given the associated responsibilities and possible consequences.

In the provided case, for any individual to sign the form on behalf of Dr. Nelson undermines the process by failing to provide him with the opportunity to decide for himself whether he meets the authorship criteria and wishes to take responsibility for all aspects of the work. Dr. Nelson himself must make this decision personally. Although you feel certain regarding his having made an important contribution to the work, Dr. Nelson nevertheless may elect to simply be acknowledged as a contributor to the work if he does not feel comfortable taking accountability for the entire work and being listed as an author. He may have remaining questions or concerns regarding the final submitted version of the manuscript, and it cannot be assumed that he is prepared to sign the form at this point. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for you to either sign the form on his behalf or to have his assistant do so. In this case, if unable to reach Dr. Nelson during his travels, then there is no alternative but to wait for his return to be available to review the final version and sign the form directly.

Given increasing awareness of potential proxy signing of authorship verification forms, a number of journals have adopted an alternate approach to preclude this possibility. Namely, journals may email all identified authors directly, at their individual email addresses, and solicit each author to personally verify their role, for instance via digital signature. This process avoids requiring the corresponding author to collect signatures from all co-authors, thereby precluding the corresponding author from obtaining a proxy signature on behalf of the co-authors. This approach also avoids the possibility that, in the event of an investigation regarding misconduct, a listed author may claim that he or she was unaware of being included as an author and had never directly signed the form. More journals will likely adopt such an approach for confirming authorship moving forward, although with varying implementation. For instance, some journals may allow a submitted manuscript to enter the review process prior to receipt of signatures from all authors, although require verified signatures before an accepted manuscript proceeds with the production and publication process.

References

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