



Shaw, D. (2011) *The authorless paper*. British Medical Journal . ISSN 0959-535X

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/57213/>

Deposited on: 31 October 2011

The Authorless Paper: why the ICMJE definition is illogical and unethical

In recent years there have been many revelations about ghost authors, who contribute to publications but are not credited, and guest authors, who do not contribute but are credited. Most medical and many other journals adhere to the authorship standards set by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), which were designed in part to combat the phenomena of ghost and guest authorship. However, the current criteria set for authorship by the ICMJE have their own problems.

Let's imagine that Andrew, Michael and Chris decide to collaborate on some research. Andrew has had a brilliant idea for a study, and he and Chris carry it out successfully. Michael writes up a paper based on their results and analysis and Chris checks and corrects it. All three approve the final draft. They are aware that their paper is of great importance, so they decide to aim high and submit it to the British Medical Journal. All goes well until they reach the authorship statement stage of the submission process, where they must agree with the statement that: "We all meet the definition of an author as stated by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors". Being ethical researchers, they look up this definition to check that they do indeed meet it. This is what they find:

Authorship credit should be based on 1) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and 3) final approval of the version to be published. Authors should meet conditions 1, 2, and 3. [1]

Andrew meets the first and third criteria; Michael the the second and third, and Chris the first and third. But if they adhere to the definition, none of them meets all three criteria: this means that they cannot in good conscience tick the box that says they do, which in turn means that they cannot submit their paper – not only to the BMJ, but to any journal that adheres to the ICMJE definition. If any of these journals proved a little flexible, they might perhaps be able to publish their work as an authorless paper, which raises its own issues of accountability. The only way they could submit the paper would be to break a rule and effectively tell a lie - even if that lie is necessary to bypass an illogical rule. This example should make it clear that the ICMJE definition is indefensible. And it is hardly a far-fetched scenario, particularly for analysis and opinion articles. If I suggested a great idea for a paper to a PhD student, and she wrote it up, and I approved it, neither of us would meet the definition of author, despite my conception and her implementation of the idea.

As stated above, the definition is clearly designed to combat ghostwriters. Anyone who has simply glanced at a draft will clearly not meet the criteria. But the ICMJE cast the net too widely, and actually make things worse for ghostwriters (and PhD students). If an academic suggests a trial, a CRO carries it out and a medical writer writes it up, all three are moral authors of the work and should be credited as such (perhaps with the CRO crediting a lead scientist, and listing others in the acknowledgements.) And this is the problem with the ICMJE definition: it is unethical. Having a great idea and sharing it with colleagues, and approving what they do with it is clearly to co-write a paper. Gathering and analysing data is to co-write a paper. And redrafting and reviewing a paper is to co-write a paper. If the ICMJE had simply said that meeting one of 1,2 or 3 was sufficient, it would be a very sensible definition. In fact, in the preamble to the definition on their website, they make two statements that actively contradict their own criteria. First, it is stated that "An 'author' is generally considered to be someone who has made substantive intellectual

contributions to a published study.”[1] This is quite correct, and Andrew, Michael and Chris all did so – thus they would generally be considered to be authors, and the ICMJE's own definition would be generally considered to be wrong. Second, it is stated (and emphasised with italics) that “An author must take responsibility for at least one component of the work, should be able to identify who is responsible for each other component, and should ideally be confident in their co-authors’ ability and integrity.”[1] Here, “at least one component” is sufficient for authorship, so why does the definition itself insist upon authors meeting all three conditions? If this is simply an error it is quite an important one.

The example of Andrew, Michael and Chris illustrates the absurdity of the ICMJE definition. The researchers might have found a cure for cancer, but cannot put their names to it because of an outrageous definition, and thus cannot publish it. Furthermore, the ICMJE's own words illustrate the lack of logic that has resulted in their self-contradictory and unethical definition. It is unethical to redefine authorship in this way, and the ICMJE's definition must be changed.

References

1. International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: Ethical Considerations in the Conduct and Reporting of Research: Authorship and Contributorship. http://www.icmje.org/ethical_1author.html (accessed 26/9/11)

All authors have completed the Unified Competing Interest form at http://www.icmje.org/coi_disclosure.pdf (available on request from the corresponding author) and declare: no support from any organisation for the submitted work [or describe if any]; no financial relationships with any organisations that might have an interest in the submitted work in the previous three years [or describe if any], no other relationships or activities that could appear to have influenced the submitted work [or describe if any]

The Corresponding Author has the right to grant on behalf of all authors and does grant on behalf of all authors, an exclusive licence (or non exclusive for government employees) on a worldwide basis to the BMJ Publishing Group Ltd and its Licensees to permit this article (if accepted) to be published in BMJ editions and any other BMJ PGL products and sublicences to exploit all subsidiary rights, as set out in our licence (<http://resources.bmj.com/bmj/authors/checklists-forms/licence-for-publication>).