

Review of: "Honorary Authorship in Biomedical Journals: The Endless Story"

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This is a topic of perennial interest, particularly in the medical sciences, as the editorial correctly observes. I note the following paper which refers in greater detail to the history of medical publication standards, 10.1007/s12664-020-01129-5 - this gives a fuller account of some of the attempts to promote ethical behaviour in publishing. The author might consider this paper relevant to the discussion of standards in medical publishing. The reference to the ICMJE recommendations later in the editorial might be extended on the basis of looking at this recent publication.

It might help to consider the volume of publication on this matter, to set the scene. The WOK records for papers which are concerned with this subject have steadily increased in number. It is possible that the growth of interest in the topic has reached a maximum as an inflection point in the cumulative count of papers on this topic has been reached recently. However, the growth rate of papers on the topic has risen and fallen since the first recorded paper to discuss this in the index in 1992, and it is too early to say the topic is waning. It might be helpful for the editorial to mention this.

Honorary authorship should, in most circumstances, be called out for what it is, a form of deception, but exactly how 'honorary authorship' is framed is the key aspect. I think that current text needs to engage with the framing of 'honorary authorship' therefore: on the one hand honorary authorship can be seen as an ethical matter, on the other, a legal matter. And my view here is that honorary authorship is for some organisations, more of a legal matter than an ethical one. Framing of the practice as either unethical or illegal is what the paper misses in its discussion.

It would then help the editorial if there was a short discussion of how this framing works: who sets standards, and the consequences when those standards are infringed. On the one hand, standards which if broken might lead to a complaint or a request to retract are very different from standards that, if breached would lead, as they might, in the case of a British doctor [or social worker] who had engaged in the practice of honorary authorship to face a fitness to practice inquiry, with the consequence that if found guilty they would be possibly barred from working. I'd suggest that the editorial in dealing with the issue of honorary authorship misses this important dimension. It is one of overlapping and conflicting framings of the matter.

As a pathology of the process of knowledge production, I would not agree that it has 'advantages' as the author states in the Abstract. Such 'advantages' as they are termed by the author, in terms of increasing citation count, have negative consequences and, I would say, the negative consequences outweigh any positives, the net effect therefore being negative.

I have a few comments on typological errors: At page 1, final line, 'becoming' rather than 'being' is more appropriate; at page 2, there is an unnecessary line break; at page 2, half-way down, the name is incorrect – 'Geoffrey Chamberlain' is correct; at page 2 and going to page 3, the reference to the ICMJE is to an older version, <https://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf> - should the later version be used, or are there other standards that the author should refer to? at page 3, last paragraph, 'ostdifferent' looks incorrect.

To conclude, the editorial is a small if not limited contribution to the debate and can be seen to provide a view from the chair to prospective authors which is both hortatory, and minatory. Such statements are worthwhile even when the message repeats much of what is already in the literature.