

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

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This paper draws attention to an important and troubling phenomenon.

Honorary authorship is of course not restricted to biomedical journals but is much more widespread. I have encountered it frequently in engineering and earth sciences. Very recently I was informed of a case in which a leading author was contacted and invited to pay for honorary authorship. I have also had my name added to someone's paper without my knowledge or consent.

I was once at a conference organised by a senior academic who had a reputation for insisting that he be listed as an author on other people's papers. A visiting scientist asked him for some clarification about one of these articles and his reply indicated that he had probably not even read it.

The basic terminology is somewhat contentious in that there is nothing particularly honourable about lending one's name to someone else's work. This is more a case of "unwarranted authorship".

This article is brief and to the point, but it could consider the slightly wider context of honorary authorship. There have also been increases in other forms of malpractice: plagiarism, duplicate submission and the formation of citation cartels, for instance. All of this indicates how easy it is to subvert bibliometry, and how making judgements on scholarship on the basis of indexes and scores is at best risky and at worst misguided.

My estimate, based on editing about 17,000 articles over 38 years as an international journal editor, is that about 70% of academic publishing is fundamentally for personnel reasons: getting a job, keeping a job or obtaining promotion. This is a powerful incentive to try to increase one's profile. The best strategy is to consider productivity in terms of quality rather than quantity. In this respect, the article could make the point that requiring authors to state their roles in preparing a paper could be a way of holding them to account.

One deficiency of this article is that it does not adequately take into account the pre-existing literature on this topic. For instance, the following paper is not discussed or cited, but it appears to be highly relevant:-

Al-Herz, W., H. Haider, M. Al-Bahhar and A. Sadeq 2013. Honorary authorship in biomedical journals: how common is it and why does it exist? *BMJ Journal of Medical Ethics* 40(5): 346-348.

This raises the question of what the present article adds to a fairly long-running debate. That is something which needs to

be clearly defined.