

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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Thank you for sending me Mohamed Kandil's Editorial titled "Honorary Authorship in Biomedical Journals: The Endless Story". Honorary authorship has many faces, ranging from gift authorships meant to promote colleagues who may not deserve it to coercive authorship and legitimate authors' displacement, which constitute academic bullying. The topic of the manuscript is important. Misattributed authorship is a real problem. It has disadvantages even beyond those listed by the author. However, I can't entirely agree with the presentation of the data.

The author claims that it is evident that honorary authorship is on the rise. This is based on three observations made by the author:

1. Data is presented that the ability to produce research reaches a peak at mid-age, following which it decreases. To compensate for the falling number of publications, researchers have adopted the practice of honorific authorship.
2. Studies are cited, one of which reported a 26% prevalence of honorific authorship in 1994, and another which reported a 42% prevalence 20 years later, in 2014.
3. Data are presented indicating a rising number of authors per published manuscript.

As for the first observation - Regardless of the declining productivity with age, no mention is made of the pressures exerted on authors by universities, employers, and granting institutions to produce as many publications as possible, even beyond peak production. (Eliminate that pressure and honorific authorship, redundant publications, and other publication misconducts may become uncommon events.)

As for the second observation - Since honorific authorship constitutes misconduct, it should be assumed that the interest in admitting the truth in a survey will differ in different groups represented by the different studies cited, whether defined by place, sector, or time. One should not compare apples to oranges. Furthermore, we need to acknowledge the progression over the years in understanding what constitutes honorific authorship. The true prevalence of honorific authorship (and ghost authorship) is unknown, whether today or twenty years ago.

As for the third observation - The rising number of authors in articles does not necessarily prove honorific authorship. Research is much more complicated, and it relies more and more on the collaborative effort of many people. The fear of ghost authorship may lead main authors to recognize a larger number of collaborators as authors. The author of this Editorial lists the four criteria for authorship established by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). He cites ICMJE that contribution to only one criterion does not qualify for authorship. While this is true, the

ICMJE gives similar weight to the message that the four criteria should not be used to prevent authorship from those who have met the first criterion by preventing them from participating in the other criteria. Ghost authorship is as relevant as a problem as honorific authorship.

The author invites medical editors to adopt simple, standardized contribution indexes that will allow identifying the exact contribution of different authors with the aid of the institutes and responsible authorities. The author does not consider the possibility that honorific authorship is probably prevalent in research institutions that turn a blind eye to this phenomenon. Counting on these institutions to act will be a fruitless endeavor.

The author recommends Editors should critically review all submissions with too many authors, from authors with an unusually high number of publications. Regretfully, Editors do not have the tools to perform that critical review and differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate authors.

Last but not least, this manuscript was submitted as a preprint Editorial. I ask QEIOS – Preprint Editorial? for whom, for what? The author provided an abstract for this Editorial. Why? I searched the QEIOS site for the author's guidelines to understand the type of publications accepted and their format but found none. I appreciate that QEIOS is trying to facilitate scholarly submissions by easing some of the hurdles placed by traditional forms of academic publishing. However, some commonality is necessary for science to continue forwards. Otherwise, we are left with an Editorial that discusses an important subject but is weakened by many messages that either lack proof or deserve a more thorough discussion.