

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

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The author argues that honorary authorship is an ethical problem, with a series of detrimental effects, that it is rising, and that more strict policing will contribute to alleviating the detrimental effects.

While I agree with part of this diagnosis, I have some problems with a few of its elements. I also feel that the proposed remedies, while probably be rooted in virtuous intentions, will neither achieve their goals nor are they capable of sustainable actions against honorary authorship. I will explain my concerns with the arguments the author offers below.

The 1994, 2011 and 2014 papers are not conclusive evidence of a rising trend, since no rise is displayed between 1994 and 2011 and the 2014 paper described a single subfield (which could be, for reasons unknown, an outlier). The claim of "aggressive progression" is thus insufficiently substantiated.

Rising author numbers can be explained through a number of trends, including but certainly not limited to different collaborative structures, the increase of professionalized statistical consultations, different team compositions and norms for reward. Honorary authorships exist in this space, but whether we can attribute even part of the rising number of authors to honorary authorships cannot be concluded from the data and arguments offered here. However, whether or not it is becoming more frequent, does not diminish the moral status of the practice.

The author argues that disciplinary measures would be required in the case of an honorary author being added without their consent. Two lines further, the practice of honorary authorship as a whole is labelled unethical. Of course there is a difference in degree of transgression, but the general label 'unethical' does not explain why disciplinary measures would not apply in the case of voluntary honorary authorship.

The example the author gives (please indicate that RCOG is the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists) also suggests that even when honorary authors are aware, disciplinary action may follow. At the same time though, the example exists in stark contrast with preceding claims about how common the practice is. What was different in the case of Chamberlin that can help us understand this response?

Further, in the list of "disadvanges", the first disadvantage (the dilution of authorship contribution) assumes that credit is a zero-sum game per publication. This is, however, not the case (differentiated by fields and author positions).

Reference 14 (ICMJE) is outdated. The date 2008 and access date 2009 precede the latest revision of those guidelines. Especially criterion 4 has been updated significantly.

The brief conclusion starts with the repetition of the unsubstantiated claim of growth of the practice of honorary authorship. The proposed remedies are twofold. First, the author invites editors to be weary of this practice and intervene when necessary. This is largely unproblematic in a moral sense, but very difficult in a practical sense. Far more problematic is remedy two, where the author recommends that we treat all papers written by larger teams as suspect, potentially demonizing collaboration, a process under pressure as it is (see Müller, 2012<sup>[1]</sup>)

The paper argues based upon incomplete evidence and offers solutions that do not, in any way, influence the root causes of honorary authorship. Instead, it asks for more policing.

A few points to take into consideration, drawing from existing literature on the issue:

- Honorary authorships can be logically inevitable as a result of the incomplete 'fit' of the ICMJE guidelines to actual practice (see, among other papers: Shaw, 2011<sup>[2]</sup>; Curzer 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). This can even lead to a situation where honorary authorships are morally desirable (see Penders/Shaw, 2020<sup>[4]</sup> | full disclosure: I co-authored this paper). The first occurs frequently while the latter is rarer. Either way, they do show failures in relying on a policing system.
- Paying attention to root causes would help make this paper more persuasive. For instance: update the evaluation of researchers to fit a reward system in which number of papers no longer matter (as much). A large body of literature on responsible research assessment exists to help support such arguments (cf. DORA, The Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics, see e.g. Hicks et al. 2015<sup>[5]</sup>).
- The critical comments contained in this review do not suggest that honorary authorship is mostly fine. It is not. However, it is a complex practice that depends on incomplete guidelines, undue rewards geared towards output maximization, and a status-based infrastructure in science. More intense policing is unlikely to eradicate it.

A few very minor comments, to wrap up, include:

- Labels 'medicine' and 'biomedicine' are not fully and completely interchangeable.
- p.1/4, last line, the word "being" can be dropped.

## References

1. <sup>^</sup>Müller, R. (2012). *Collaborating in life science research groups: The question of authorship*. *Higher Education Policy*, 25(3), 289-311.
2. <sup>^</sup>Shaw, D. (2011). *The ICMJE's definition of authorship is illogical and unethical*. *BMJ*, 343.
3. <sup>^</sup>Curzer, H. J. (2021). *Authorship and justice: Credit and responsibility*. *Accountability in Research*, 28(1), 1-22.
4. <sup>^</sup>Penders, B., & Shaw, D. M. (2020). *Civil disobedience in scientific authorship: Resistance and insubordination in science*. *Accountability in research*, 27(6), 347-371.
5. <sup>^</sup>Hicks, D., Wouters, P., Waltman, L., De Rijcke, S., & Rafols, I. (2015). *Bibliometrics: the Leiden Manifesto for research metrics*. *Nature*, 520(7548), 429-431.

