

write articles, may provide essential contributions to the direction, conduct, and conclusions of the research. In short, the guidelines are not so much a matter of policing journal authorship as they are an endorsement of the most robust methodology for creating meaningful scientific research.

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Commentary: Honorary or incorrect

Paul T. Sergeant, MD, PhD

The article “Honorary Authorship in Cardiothoracic Surgery” by Noruzzi and colleagues¹ in this issue of the *Journal* is an intellectual and ethically challenging work, demanding an in-depth reflection on our behavior in finalizing scientific work into a published format. The authors study the awareness and implementation of the guidelines as created by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE).²

An immediate challenging observation is the word “honorary.” “Honorary” stands for not needing the usual requirements. Within the publishing world, the word “ghost authorship”³ is defined as a person who has made considerable contributions to the scientific work and/or writing but is not listed as author. So as well, the absence of the presence of an author does not provide the mandatory transparency of a scientific work and the mandatory respect for those having done this work. Honorary authorships are defined less specifically, differently, or not even defined in varying scientific domains. In addition, the order of authors in a list has varied historically, with specific importance for the first and last, as well as the first 5 identified authors.



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CENTRAL MESSAGE

The ghost absence as well as the honorary presence of an author does not provide the mandatory transparency of a scientific work and the mandatory respect for those having done the work.

Martinson and colleagues in *Nature*⁴ (2005) classified honorary authorship under bad behavior and in the same category as falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism. However, if a mentor has influenced positively a scholar through hundreds of hours of one-to-one guidance and has impacted his or her reflection, behavior, and practice, then I do not see anything unethical in having the scholar place this mentor as an honorary author out of gratitude and respect. My mentor has always refused this gratitude and respect, even though we have worked laboriously on every letter and semicolon (in his usual manner) in several manuscripts. However, the ICMJE has defined guidelines, and guidelines are created to be followed. These guidelines were created because, indeed, the names of authors appear and disappear for unethical reasons. Let us imagine that one has designed and executed thousands of therapeutic

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processes. Later, these processes form the basis of a scientific analysis. The strictest reading of the ICMJE guidelines does not automatically guarantee an authorship of this scientific analysis.

Medicine and science are certainly not the only domains in which credits are given or claimed inappropriately. The same is valid in military battle conditions, sports, politics, war, career promotion, and every aspect of life.

Inappropriate credits in science are sometimes offered by authors for self- or study-promotion. Placing the name of an honorary author in a top-peer reviewed journal will, at times, guarantee later project funding if that same author is the one distributing the research funding within an organization. Other authors are associated with the strictest possible scientific integrity, and their association with a manuscript will bias/guarantee positive review and publication. In the past, author names were deleted from submissions for review; currently, author names are available to all reviewers.

Inappropriate credits are sometimes claimed by chairmen of departments or research units, against the wish or intention of the original authors. Not accepting this claim has caused failures in promotion, even closures of careers. Stating that the authorship has been “gifted” when flaws are uncovered, are not unacceptable, as stated by Noruzzi and colleagues.

The authors of this manuscript identified the 5 most important journals in cardiovascular surgery and based their research and method on previous studies on the same subject. It is extremely interesting to note that, on this very ethical issue, only 1511 of 2500 invited primary authors opened, even repeated, the invitation e-mail, with only 29% respondents. Is this already symptomatic for the impeding and stimulating processes guiding appropriate

authorship within the medical community? One could question the accuracy and the willingness to answer the survey. Indeed, If the primary author was under pressure to “adapt” the author list, what will be the enthusiasm to complete this survey and inform his or her “honorary” author that this information becomes transparent? The observed response rates of this repeated survey are certainly not that bad, since direct mail has the expectation of single-digit response rates and direct e-mail even less than 1%.

The honorary authorship rates show the variability between strict and liberal interpretations of the guideline, in that 63% of the authors state that at least one of the co-authors had not performed authorship according to the strict ICMJE guidelines, and that according to their personal more liberal interpretation of the guidelines, only 25% fulfilled the ICMJE guidelines of honorary authorship.

Noruzzi and colleagues clearly identify some of the limitations of their study in the addressee (the person you write the mail to) as in the nonresponse bias. All these aspects aside, honorary authorship is still a major issue and is present in most manuscripts. It clearly limits transparency and is unfair for the other authors. It is also an indication, by the honorary author, of his absence of respect for the laborious work of scientific research.

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