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## Commentary: Deserved honor, or honor among thieves?

Paul Kurlansky, MD

*Seeking honor, or honor among thieves?*

*Anyone who seeks greatness, greatness flees from him, and, conversely, anyone who flees from greatness, greatness seeks him.*

—Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b

In 1978, a group of editors established guidelines for the format of journal articles.<sup>1</sup> The original Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals created by “the Vancouver Group,” now the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), have been expanded. The Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals<sup>2</sup> address broader ethical issues regarding authorship. Each of the 5 journals involved in the survey by Noruzi and colleagues<sup>3</sup> clearly indicate their endorsement of ICMJE authorship guidelines, and most require delineation of specific author contributions.

These guidelines were intended to ensure appropriate credit for those making a substantial contribution to scientific reports, while establishing responsibility and accountability for published work. The issue may seem self-evident: Listed authors should be those who have made a meaningful contribution to the work presented. However, perhaps the issue is more complex. A mentor who has had a major impact on the enthusiasm for exploring certain topics, as well as the specific research questions and analytical approaches, may not have written or even reviewed what was submitted. Does an acknowledgment on the bottom of the last line really do justice to the monumental impact on the work product? Might “honorary” authorship be a more appropriate expression of gratitude and contribution?

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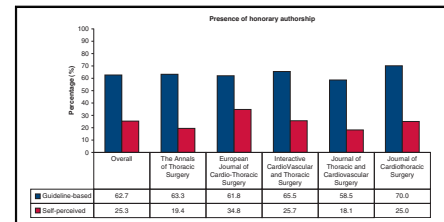
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**Guideline and self-perceived honorary authorship in cardiac surgical journals.**

### CENTRAL MESSAGE

Despite widespread misunderstanding of current ICMJE guidelines for authorship, their careful application will foster the best approach to meaningful scientific research.

It is just in this realm of ethical uncertainty that Noruzi and colleagues’ survey<sup>3</sup> provides some very interesting, if not astounding, insights into authorship behavior in the realm of cardiothoracic surgery. Using a survey based on previous studies, they achieved a response rate (28.9%) much lower than that in comparable studies in the medical profession.<sup>4,5</sup> Among the authors who responded, 77.1% claimed to be aware of ICMJE guidelines, while only 47.0% were aware of the general issue of honorary authorship—strongly suggesting that many who professed awareness of the guidelines had little knowledge or understanding of their content. Likewise, 62.7% of authors stated that at least 1 of the coauthors had performed solely nonauthorship tasks, whereas only 25.3% believed that their article contained at least 1 honorary author, once again suggesting little awareness of the meaning of honorary authorship. Clearly, the topic does not appear to be well understood, nor is its potential importance fully appreciated by our colleagues. However, beyond the potential moral outrage or professional embarrassment that might ensue, it is important to recognize that, in essence, the ICMJE recommendations not only appropriately define authorship but also, perhaps even more importantly, teach us how to best construct an article. Clinicians contributing cases to a surgical cohort may have little time or patience for article preparation; however, their clinical insight and acumen may be critical to proper focus, analysis, and conclusion. Department chairs, whose administrative, clinical, and other responsibilities afford little opportunity to

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 colleagues<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup>

An immediate challenging observation is the word “honorary.” “Honorary” stands for not needing the usual requirements. Within the publishing world, the word “ghost authorship”<sup>3</sup> 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.



Paul T. Sergeant, MD, PhD

### 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*<sup>4</sup> (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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