

CORRESPONDENCE : Letter to Editor

PROPOSED REVISION IN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF MEDICAL JOURNAL EDITORS (ICMJE) AUTHORSHIP CRITERIA

To
The Editor, JPMER

Sir,

A couple of recent authorship disputes in our institution forced us to critically relook at the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) Recommendations with the most recent revision in August 2013.¹ According to these, authorship requires:

“Substantial contributions to: The conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND

Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND

Final approval of the version to be published; AND

Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.”

The keyword here is “AND” which, when taken in context with the two scenarios given below, gives an altogether different hue to these guidelines, calling for some revision.

Scenario 1: A faculty member has an idea, which, after discussion with colleagues, is formulated to a research proposal. A PhD student joins who is asked to write the protocol for the study. The student collects all the study data, writes the thesis, and after that the student leaves. The manuscript is written by the chief guide and the student does not even do any revision “critically for important intellectual content” (condition 2 of the ICMJE requirements for authorship). The student agrees to points no. 3 and 4 of the ICMJE requirements for authorship.

As per the current ICMJE requirements, this student does not qualify for authorship. Is it justified?

Scenario 2: A paper is published in NEJM and has 11 authors, all from academic centers.² Actually, it is a phase 2 trial supported by a pharmaceutical company. The industry persons involved in the study are only thanked, the exact words being, “We thank so and so, the staff of (the Company) who were involved in data collection and analyses, including Dr (Name) for contributions to study design, and (4 names) of (Company) for their contributions to data acquisition, review, and interpretation in previous studies and throughout the span of the trial.”

Paradoxically, even though they designed the whole study and also did the analysis, they do not qualify for authorship and are thus not included if they did not satisfy the second criterion for authorship.

Even when company authors are included, they are placed closer to the end in the long list of authors.³⁻⁵ An earlier

recommendation that in industry-sponsored studies, a statement to that effect should be displayed at a more prominent place, for instance, below the authors byline⁶ has largely been ignored by the journals as well as the PubMed.

We recommend that

- In case of a publication coming out of the thesis work of a student, her/his name should not be removed; not only that, the student should be the first author even though s/he may not even qualify for authorship based on the current ICMJE criteria.
- In case of industry-sponsored studies, this fact should find a place below the authors byline as recommended by Matheson several years ago. Second, the authors list must include the names(s) of the concerned industry personnel involved; it is preferable that they should be first/second authors based on their contributions even if they do not qualify for authorship criteria as per ICMJE. The information about the sponsoring agency should always be visible wherever the abstracts are displayed, e.g., in PubMed.
- In case of investigator-initiated studies in which the industry role was only to provide funding, there is no need to give the name of any author from industry, but the source of funding should be mentioned in the byline below the author names.
- For studies funded by government agencies or not-for-profit Trusts/Foundations, the name of the funding agency should be mentioned as a byline below the author names.

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