

Editorial

Who should be an author?

Over recent months I have been approached by authors of accepted or already published papers with requests to remove an author or to add an author. Typically, they think that this is a trivial request that can be easily accommodated with little explanation other than ‘after the manuscript was accepted we remembered that author X was actually away at the time we did the experiments and wrote them up’ or ‘after the paper appeared on-line (or in the journal) X reminded us that he actually performed some of the work or had valuable input into the interpretation of the results’. In fact, modifying authorship of a paper at any stage is not trivial, although it may be legitimate. For example, when a manuscript is being revised following receipt of reviewers’ comments some experiments and/or interpretations may be removed, meaning that an author who was involved only in those parts of the manuscript should be removed. Likewise, new data may be added, new experiments performed, or new interpretations included, and these may require the addition of one or more authors. These changes are easily accommodated by mentioning and explaining them in the response to reviewers’ comments and they do not present any difficulty. However, changing authorship once a manuscript has been accepted for publication is more difficult. It could be done with no ‘outside’ knowledge at the correction of proofs stage, but will require publication of a correction if done once a paper is published, even if this is on-line. If an author is to be removed or added at the proofs stage or once a paper is published, then there is a formal procedure to be entered into to achieve this. This is outlined by the Committee on Publication Ethics⁽¹⁾ and essentially requires (a) a valid reason for making the change and (b) a signed letter from all authors including those to be removed or added indicating agreement to the removal or addition. Note that if an author is removed or added after publication of the paper on-line then that version of the paper cannot be modified and will remain in its original form; the modification is made in a separate correction.

The forgoing discussion prompts me to remind readers of the rules governing authorship and contributorship, as specified by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors⁽²⁾. An ‘author’ is generally considered to be someone who has made substantive intellectual contributions to a published study. In the past, readers were rarely provided with information about contributions to studies from those persons listed as authors. However, the *British Journal of Nutrition* now requires that contributions of all authors be listed at the end of the text⁽³⁾. But what are the quantity and quality of contribution that qualify for authorship? The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has recommended that authorship should be based on:

- (a) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data;

- (b) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content;
 (c) final approval of the version to be published.

Authors should meet all three of the above conditions. Each author should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content. Increasingly, authorship of multicentre trials is attributed to a group. All members of the group who are named as authors should fully meet the above criteria for authorship. Note that acquisition of funding, collection of data, or general supervision of the research group alone does not constitute authorship. All contributors who do not meet the criteria for authorship should be listed in an Acknowledgements section. Examples of those who might be acknowledged include a person who provided purely technical help, writing assistance, or a department chair who provided only general support. Groups of persons who have contributed materially to the paper but whose contributions do not justify authorship may be listed under such headings as ‘clinical investigators’ or ‘participating investigators’, and their function or contribution should be described – for example, ‘served as scientific advisors’, ‘critically reviewed the study proposal’, ‘collected data’, or ‘provided and cared for study patients’.

My advice to those preparing manuscripts for submission to the *BJN*, or to any other journal for that matter, is to think carefully about all those who might merit authorship or acknowledgement well in advance and to ensure that the role of each individual is properly considered and that they are named as appropriate.

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