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WHOSE NAME COMES FIRST?

*The etiquette of
publication:
A civilized guide to
courteous
coauthorship.*

BY LAN T. GIEN RN, PhD and
SUZAN BANOUB-BADDOUR RN, DNSc

Collaboration among professionals with varied expertise has become a necessity in order to cope with the increasing complexity and sophistication of research. Coauthorship improves opportunities for getting grants; increases networking, mutual support and motivation; promotes mentor relationships in both the academic and the clinical setting; and divides labor among authors so that several articles can be achieved in a shorter time—important in today's "publish or perish" environment.¹ Despite these many advantages, multiple authorship brings unique problems. These problems can stem from differences in personality, writing style or working pace. Work can be seen as unfairly or illogically distributed. Yet these problems can seem minor in comparison to the problems raised in assigning authorship credit. Whose name *does* come first?

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Several incidents of unjustified coauthorship have been reported. In some instances, individuals listed among authors did not know that their name was included, did not approve the text as submitted, or for various reasons, requested that their name be removed. Another example is of an author who submitted a manuscript to a journal, while the coauthor submitted the same manuscript to another journal.

Coauthorship has sometimes been assigned based on reciprocity of favor and on one's position on the professional ladder rather than on real contribution. At the other extreme, persons who made real contributions to the work were sometimes left out of the published credits.²

Often, the improper assignment of authorship credits arises from the fact that publication leads to respect, power, income, promotions and tenure for the

individuals involved, as well as prestige for their institutions. Many of the problems of coauthorship can be prevented by better planning and clearer agreement among the partners.

Rating credits

Since multiple authorship is here to stay, authors are calling for well defined authorship criteria that are accepted by all scientific disciplines.³ These criteria would clearly outline the rights, responsibilities, ethics and etiquette of coauthorship to ensure that the integrity of scholarly contributions is protected. The guidelines must be comprehensive: When will the decision on authorship be made? Who will be the authors? In what sequence will the names appear? Which names will be acknowledged in a footnote?

Currently, few disciplines have guidelines for coauthorship. Although the Council of Biology Editors does not have full criteria, it has issued a statement on authorship.⁴ The American Chemical Society has developed a statement on the ethics of publication, which includes authorship credits.⁵ The American Psychological Association has some criteria.⁶ The International Committee of Medical Editors,⁷ also known as the Vancouver group, has published a set of statements on authorship and acknowledgement, which are based in part on previously published opinions and organizational guidelines.

The criteria developed by the two latter organizations have in common the attempt to differentiate between authors and other contributors through either the degree or the type of contribution. Minor and major contributions were specified. They also give authors specific responsibilities: All coauthors must be able to participate in a discussion or defense of their paper, and respond to published criticisms of the same. By the same token, if data are shown to be faulty or invented, all coauthors are responsible.

The issue of coauthorship did not receive much attention in nursing literature until recently. In the 1980s, three national surveys were done in the United States to explore the views of nurses and other health care professionals on research publication credits.⁸ The findings indicated that many clinical nurse specialists and some nurse administrators were not familiar with the etiquette of assigning credits in publications, although

nurses in academic settings said it was an important issue. Compared with other health care professionals, nurses' views are similar to those of social workers and dentists, perhaps because research and publication are relatively new concerns to all three groups.

Based on the studies cited above, some nurse authors have made useful suggestions for beginning collaborators to avoid potential conflicts and to provide rightful recognition of all contributors.⁹ These guidelines are not hard-and-fast rules, but a set of criteria that any group can use to formulate its own specific standards.

Guidelines

1. Individual responsibilities should be made clear, preferably in writing, at the start of the study. The written agreement should be flexible enough to allow change in the degree of participation as the project proceeds.
2. The method of resolving persisting conflict in the group should also be decided early. The best method may be an impartial arbitration by a person familiar with the field of study but not associated with any of the potential authors.
3. The identification of those who are entitled to be named authors should be decided in advance. The authors-to-be should be accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities to make a major contribution or numerous minor contributions to the project.
4. The sequence of authors is determined by the person who takes major responsibility for the writing of that particular manuscript, or by the order of importance of contributions to the paper or study.¹⁰ Thus, the name of the principal contributor should appear first; other names should be listed in order of decreasing contribution. Status—such as academic degree or professional role—should not be the deciding influence on assignment of publication credit.¹¹

Authors from nursing and dentistry share a viewpoint that differs from that of most other scientific disciplines. According to one study, most nurses and dentists believe that "when equal time is spent in each task, the individual who assumes responsibility for designing the project should receive senior authorship, not the individual who writes the final report for publica-

This difference in opinion may cause conflicts when nurses collaborate with other disciplines. Therefore, it is particularly important for members of a multidisciplinary group to discuss their preferences at the start of the project and to arrive at a solution agreeable to all. Since coauthors bear responsibility for the content of the paper, each author should have the opportunity to approve the final draft before it is submitted for publication.

5. In cases where all coauthors contribute equally, either of two common practices is acceptable: tossing a coin, or listing authors in alphabetical order. When several publications are planned, some groups rotate names so that everyone has the chance to be cited as first author. In any of these cases, credit should be given equally to all in a footnote. Huth suggested that the group could represent themselves by a collective title that reflects the field of the study.¹³ The footnote would then acknowledge the persons represented by the collective title.
6. A single-author publication could evolve from an expansion of a group project. In this case, all original members of the project should be consulted. If they agree, the group members should be publicly acknowledged.
7. For various reasons, a group member could drop out of a project. This individual is entitled to an acknowledgment, but not to coauthorship status.

Abrégé

Quel nom vient en premier? La corédaction dans les publications de soins infirmiers devient de plus en plus courante. Pourtant, nombre d'infirmières ne connaissent pas bien les règles d'étiquette sur la reconnaissance des auteurs. S'appuyant sur des travaux de recherches, des lignes directrices sont suggérées aux corédactrices débutantes. On y retrouve entre autres suggestions une entente écrite au début du projet, l'arbitrage d'une tierce partie, des moyens logiques de choisir la séquence des honneurs, l'approbation de l'ébauche définitive par toutes les corédactrices et le droit d'une corédactrice de demander que son nom ne soit pas publié.

8. Before anyone is listed as coauthor, or is acknowledged, that person's permission should be sought to avoid surprises and embarrassment.

Collaborative research can be fruitful and rewarding. Yet continuing success and good fellowship depend on clarifying the rights and responsibilities of all contributors. □

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