Report from an Authorship Retreat

Moderator:
Diane Scott-Lichter
American Association for 
Cancer Research
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Speakers:
Christine Laine
Annals of Internal Medicine
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Ana Marusic
Croatian Medical Journal
Zagreb, Croatia

Reporter:
Barbara Gastel
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas

In conjunction with the 2009 CSE annual meeting, an evening-long retreat was held on defining authorship across the sciences. An annual-meeting session the next morning focused largely on highlights of the retreat.

CSE 2008–2009 President Diane Scott-Lichter, who had convened the retreat, introduced the session. She observed that issues regarding authorship have become more complex as large, often international collaborations in science have multiplied. She also noted that people in a variety of scientific disciplines and professional roles had participated in the retreat.

Christine Laine reported that the retreat had included presentations by members of two panels. In one panel, a journal editor, an academic scientist, and a writer in industry had discussed defining authorship; in the other, presenters had addressed differences among disciplines and geographic settings. Laine said that most at the retreat had agreed on the following: Researchers (not editors) should determine who is an author, editors should require authors to identify their contributions, contributors not listed as authors should be identified in the acknowledgments, and ultimately accountability is most important. Less consensus existed, she said, about how best to ask about contributions, whether authorship implies accountability for the entire paper or only for the part reporting the work that a particular contributor did, and whether editors should set criteria for authorship. She observed that such criteria might help junior researchers to negotiate for authorship. She also noted that in some research in physics, genetics, and astronomy, so many people participate that collecting data on specific contributions might not be reasonable.

Ana Marusic presented an overview of research on authorship. The largest proportions of research on the topic, she said, involve authorship in the biomedical and psychology literatures. She noted that journals vary in whether their instructions address authorship criteria; doing so is rare in humanities journals. She said that about 20% of codes of ethics of professional societies, corporations, government, and academic institutions address authorship.

Marusic summarized four studies done by the Croatian Medical Journal. In the first, the researchers found that the format for asking about contributions influenced the proportion of people undeservedly listed as authors. In the second, forms for disclosing authors’ contributions were found to be unreliable; responses differed among authors of the same paper and changed over time. In the third, it was found that, regardless of instruction or experience regarding authorship, medical students, physicians, and medical researchers all viewed the following items as most important in qualifying a person for authorship: “conception and design of the study”, “analysis and interpretation of the data”, and “drafting the article”. In the fourth, providing a scale to quantify contributions was found to reduce listing of undeserving authors.

Marusic emphasized that much remains unknown. “Until there is enough evidence to propose fair, universal, and reliable guidelines for authorship,” she concluded, “perhaps editors should ask all authors a simple open-ended question: ‘Why do you think you deserve to be an author of this manuscript?’”

In the open discussion that followed, attendees discussed both general issues and specific experiences. Scott-Lichter said that on the basis of the retreat and other input, the authorship section of CSE’s White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journal Publications might be updated.

References