



Lead-Author Responsibility

Question

As editor of a scientific journal, you publish abstracts of papers to be presented at the annual meeting of the sponsoring society. Before publication of an abstract, you receive a letter from an individual who claims exclusion from authorship on a submitted abstract and requests that the abstract (if accepted by the program committee) not be published. You learn from the claimant that the disagreement is related to a disputed order of authorship, which has led the lead author to leave off the name of the claimant from the submission. Does the program committee or journal editor have an obligation to withhold publication of the abstract pending resolution of the authorship question? Should the lead author be contacted for clarification? If the lead author confirms the above scenario, is there an ethical responsibility for the lead author to include the claimant as an author? (Summarized from *CBE Views* 1997;20(3):106)



Solutions

From the standpoint of a publisher who represents ownership of several biomedical research journals, I believe that in a case of

authorship dispute, the program committee or journal editor has the obligation to withhold publication of an accepted abstract pending resolution of the authorship question. The first step in resolution of the dispute would be to query the lead or corresponding author regarding the authorship and to ask for clarification. Pending adequate clarification, all authors should be requested to sign a statement that they agree to the authorship and title as it stands. Should the authorship remain unresolved in this situation, the institution where the work was performed should be contacted to investigate the matter to satisfactory resolution. Should this fail, it is then the institution's responsibility to contact the government's Office of Research Integrity to investigate the matter.

It is the responsibility of the program committee or editor to refuse publication of the abstract until the authorship issue is resolved. If the excluded author were to be found unjustly omitted from the abstract, it is, of course, the ethical responsibility and obligation of the senior author to include the author on the abstract.

In the case of a full article, such problems

might be avoided by the practice of requiring all authors to sign an agreement indicating their participation (and the extent of their participation) in the preparation of an article, however unpleasant and unwieldy this process might be. All authors should be made aware of a work in progress, and no "author" who did not participate in its preparation should be included as an author. If all authors were involved in preparation of a given article, it should not be difficult to collect their signatures indicating that 1) they agree with the content and authorship of the article; 2) the article is not under consideration for publication elsewhere; 3) the article *or information* has not been published previously and that the information contained therein is original; 4) and they assign copyright to the copyright holder of the journal (except in the case of government employees).

Signatures of all authors on the copyright form protects the authors, owners of the copyright, and publisher from potential legal suits arising from dispute of authorship.

Michael Held, Director
The Rockefeller University Press
New York, New York

The designation and sequence of authors are the responsibility of the lead author. Notification of the omission of an author requires the journal editor or program chair to contact both the claimant and lead author to clarify the situation. In general, publication of an abstract should not be done without that clarification. For purposes of program accuracy, however, when clarification cannot be obtained prior to the publication deadline, the abstract might be printed with the lead author's name, when that is not in dispute, followed by "et al". This would allow both abstract publication and extra time to resolve the authorship issue.

Requirement of a signed authorship form as part of the submission of an abstract for presentation, as is required for publication of a paper in a journal, would add a formality to the authorship process which might help minimize the chance of circumstances such as those denoted by the questioner. The editor could be certain that the listed authors, at least, were in agreement as to their appropriate listing and rank order. While questions regarding omitted authors might be resolved as a part of that formal process, no journal editor nor program chair would know of any omissions unless an objection were raised.

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Here is the tactic we actually chose. Our journal did not reject this abstract outright nor put it on hold because of the author dispute since the selection of abstracts for the meeting is a peer-review process which takes place independent of the journal editorial staff. However, on the basis of scientific merit, this abstract was not selected for presentation at the society's annual meeting and therefore was not published by the journal. Because it appeared that the authors intended to submit the full manuscript elsewhere, we simply recommended further mediation of the authorship issue through the authors'

respective departmental chairs. Moreover, if the principal investigator (PI) should instead choose to submit the manuscript to our journal (regardless of the abstract-selection issue) and the authorship dispute has not been settled, we would process the manuscript as usual and publish an erratum if the ongoing mediation modified the authorship or its order. Given that there was a PI (and that the PI role was not in dispute), we would follow the PI's lead until an independent body of appropriate authority informed us to do otherwise.

Our actions were based on the following premises: 1) The journal's role is important but limited in such disputes. The journal must establish ground rules regarding publication decisions and, where appropriate, encourage mediation within the department or departments (or institution(s)) involved when authorship disputes arise. When mediation is required, the journal should respond to the recommendations of the mediating body. 2) The PI should assign the order of authorship. If there is disagreement, mediation outside the journal should take place. If the scientific content is not in question and the PI is clearly identified, publication of the abstract or related manuscript need not be placed on hold pending resolution of an authorship dispute. The journal can publish a later erratum to denote the response of any mediation which differs from what the PI originally submitted. 3) In this particular case, the submitter of the abstract appeared to be the PI apparently by consensus of the authors. The PI agreed that the claimant was worthy of authorship but left the claimant off because of the disagreement about order of authorship.

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New Question: A Question of Territory

At what point does responsibility for scientific content of the journal become that of the jour-

nal and editorial staff instead of the author(s) submitting the article for publication?

As managing editor of your journal, you are about to finalize layout for a future issue and have already received final corrections from most authors. You then receive a heavily corrected set of galleys from one group of authors with the telephoned explanation that a few cases have been added that require changes throughout and not just an addendum. The authors have gone to the trouble to recalculate values in several of the tables accordingly. They feel sure you will accept these extensive corrections because their addition does not appreciably change the conclusions. You realize that this is the time to quote chapter and verse of journal policy that the journal cannot accept such changed data points at this stage of the publication process when the article has already passed peer review. You must advise these authors that it is too late. What reason(s) can you offer to defend your journal's policy to these authors when it in fact overrides their request? Would you ever consider delaying publication to let authors add data to a paper?

The situations described as New Questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and those that are may have been modified to focus the question. We regret any confusion that misunderstanding of this policy may have caused in the past.

Send your responses to the new question by 15 December 1997 to Della Mundy, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, Department of Medical Editing, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94612-3429; telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail Della.Mundy@nkal.kaiperm.org.