

by Della Mundy

A Question of Ownership

A coordinator for an institution's departmental publication archive searches the National Library of Medicine's PubMed database to locate any articles written by department authors that might have been published recently. A record of an article is retrieved. It shows that one author of the article is a staff member and another author is in a different institution; but only the other institution is shown as the source of the article, and there is no attribution to the archivist's institution. On checking the manuscript's title page submitted earlier, the archivist verifies that both institutions were listed. Is it appropriate to request that an erratum (now commonly used to correct data errors or omission of authors from PubMed database records) be added to ensure complete and accurate attribution?

Solutions

Correct institutional attribution can be important for a variety of reasons. The corresponding author could have inadvertently omitted the institution of a coauthor, but in the instance cited, the journal was responsible for the omission.

I suggest that the corresponding author request that an erratum be published in the journal and simultaneously make the request to PubMed. PubMed will not act until the erratum is published in the journal. The PubMed home page has a "Help/FAQ" under which "Errors or Omissions" explains the process for requesting a change in a MEDLINE citation.

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From the information presented in this question, I assume that both authors' names were included but that the byline gave the incorrect impression that they were from the same institution. The purpose of the suggested erratum would be to correct the institutional affiliation of one author by adding the second institution.

An erratum seems like a reasonable solution. I would suggest that the author from the omitted institution contact the other author to ensure that the manuscript as submitted did show both institutions (to verify that the error was made by the journal and was not an oversight in manuscript preparation). In my experi-

ence, when two authors and two institutions are involved, there are often multiple copies of the same manuscript, and it doesn't hurt to check. Having verified that, I believe it would also be a good idea to send a letter signed by both authors, so that the journal would know that both the problem and the suggested solution had been agreed upon by the two authors, and to enclose a copy of the submitted title page that included both institutions.

Although it is a relatively minor point compared with other departures from reality that one sometimes encounters in bylines (omitting an author, for example), the correction would be justified for several reasons. First, readers who might wish to contact one or both authors would know where to address their inquiries and would not waste time in trying to reach both at the institution listed. Second, the correction would prevent a minor error from compounding. Institutions have their own internal methods for measuring outcomes, and some might rely on clipping services or other methods that include quantitative and qualitative assessment of publication data. Third, the accuracy of databases requires correction of errors, including errors of omission.

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New Question:

A Question of Conflict of Interest

A peer reviewer for a journal receives a manuscript documenting increased consumption of natural gas and presenting an analysis that justifies increasing charges to consumers. The reviewer notes that the manuscript cites a reference naming a committee as corporate author and logs on to the committee's Web site for more information. The reviewer notices that the committee's sponsoring organization is a natural gas marketing association and that its board of directors includes an author of the manuscript. The author's membership on the board has not been mentioned in the text or footnotes of the manuscript. Should the reviewer notify the journal? How does this situation affect the review? What mechanism might the journal use to disclose any potential conflict of interest?

The situations described as new questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Department of Medical Editing, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94712-3429. Telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail della.mundy@kp.org.