

# Nurse Author & Editor

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### Authorial Agreements: Get it in writing before you do the work!

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#### Introduction

In my experience as research assistant and nursing editor, I have written and edited many nursing articles for publication: some of which I have received credit for, and others which I have not, depending on the type and extent of my contribution to the work. Until recently I had not experienced the need to obtain an authorial agreement in writing prior to beginning the work, but an unpleasant experience with publication has taught me how important this initial step can be. I hope the following information will help nurse writers to avoid a similar experience.

#### An unpleasant experience

A couple of years ago, I worked as a research assistant for a university professor for three months, during which time we collaborated on the writing of three research articles for publication. The professor and I had an enthusiastic and congenial working relationship, and we verbally agreed that I would be co-author on any publications we worked on together. The first article was immediately accepted for publication, and we were both listed as authors. Two more articles were completed and submitted for publication but unfortunately were not accepted on first submission. Around this time, my other work commitments began to contribute significant pressure, and it was with some regret that I decided not to continue working with the professor. We parted on good terms and agreed it would be a pleasure to collaborate in the future.

The second and third articles that we wrote together have since been published in other journals, with my name omitted from the authorship. When I discovered this, I compared the published articles with the original documents I had collaborated on, and they were extremely similar, in some cases, verbatim, with what I wrote, specifically the introduction, literature review and conclusion for both papers, and substantial parts of the results sections. The title of the second paper which I wrote had been changed and some paragraphs added to the discussion section. The title of the third paper was unchanged from my original submission. Both abstracts were changed, and further editing work done, which strengthened both papers.

As soon as I discovered the papers had been published, without listing me as co-author, I attempted to contact the professor who declined to answer my emails or return my phone calls for a further five days, but eventually responded that I did not meet authorship criteria as I had been contracted as a research assistant to perform the work. As I had met authorship criteria for the first paper we collaborated on, and performed exactly the same work on the second and third papers, I decided to escalate my concerns to the journals involved and notified the professor of my intention.

In my contact with the journals, I submitted the initial documents given to me by the professor, as

well as my final submissions and reference library. I keep copies of all professional email correspondence and was able to submit several emails from the professor enthusing about my work on "our article", including records of original submissions to the journals which later rejected the submissions. In addition, I had correspondence from one of the original journals listing me as co-author on one of the papers. Despite my evidence, the editors of the journals in question decided to accept the word of the university professor that I had not contributed sufficiently to the articles to be considered an author, although one of them conceded that an erratum would be published, acknowledging my contribution to the paper.

### **Who qualifies as an author?**

Guidelines for authors are available on journal websites and should be followed closely. Some journals ask for details of the specific contribution of each author. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors recommends the following criteria for authorship.

- Authorship credit should be based on (1) substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; (2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (3) final approval of the version to be published. All three criteria must be met for a person to be designated as an author.
- Acquisition of funding, collection of data, or general supervision of the research group, alone, does not justify authorship.
- All persons designated as authors should qualify for authorship, and all those who qualify should be listed.
- Each author should have participated sufficiently to take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content. <http://www.ICMJE.org/>

The right to authorship is not dependent on position or whether the contribution was paid for or voluntary. Research assistants are equally entitled to authorship if they meet the criteria (Australian Government, 2007).

### **How to avoid authorial disputes**

Multiple authorship of journal articles has become the norm and can be a fraught process unless authors agree in writing on some ground rules at the outset. If you are considering collaborating on writing a paper for publication it is highly recommended that all authors should jointly make decisions about contributors/authors early in the writing process, preferably before work on the paper begins. Decisions should include the order of author names, who will assume responsibility for each section of the manuscript, plans for the number of papers to be written, and focus of each paper. In addition, written records should be maintained of group writing activity logs, records of meetings held, and manuscript drafts, including co-authors' recommendations for revisions of drafts and the outcomes of those suggestions (Oermann, 2002). Written evidence of authorship agreements can help avoid later disputes.

### **First author responsibilities**

The first or lead author contributes the most to the project and manuscript, and has more responsibilities associated with writing the paper than the other authors. These include: leading discussions about authorship; completing own section of the manuscript; ensuring adherence to author guidelines; editing drafts and suggesting revisions to other authors as needed; maintaining copies of all drafts, manuscript discussions, and meeting notes; facilitating final approval of the

manuscript by co-authors; ensuring journal submission is carried out according to journal requirements; coordinating signing of copyright agreement by each co-author; and, reviewing page proofs and returning them promptly to the publisher (Oermann, 2002).

### **Corresponding author and co-author responsibilities**

The first author is usually the corresponding author, but a co-author can assume this role, if agreed by the author group. The corresponding author is responsible for: all contact between the authors and the journal editors; working with editors to ensure revisions are completed in a timely manner; and, distributing reprints of the published article and answering any questions that may arise (Oermann, 2002). Co-authors are responsible for the intellectual content of the whole manuscript, not only the sections they contributed to. Therefore, they need to approve the final version and sign a copyright agreement. Each author should be able to defend the content of the paper in public.

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### **Honorary and ghost authorship**

Two common misuses of authorship criteria include honorary and ghost authorship. Honorary authorship lists people as authors who do not meet the criteria, such as department head, project advisor, supervisor, or personal friend. This has become a common scenario as more articles are written listing multiple authors. Ghost authorship entails failure to include actual authors such as editors and researchers who wrote the paper but are not listed (Oermann, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

Guidelines on publication ethics are widely available and it is highly recommended that any nurse considering writing for publication become familiar with these.

**<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1742-1241.2006.01230.x/pdf>**

Do not assume that a good working relationship with colleagues will prevent authorial disputes. When asked to co-author a paper, get it in writing before you do the work!

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