



(Ending) Honorary authorship

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Ending Honorary Authorship

CREDIT FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS MUST BE CLEARLY AND APPROPRIATELY ASSIGNED at the time of publication. This task has become increasingly complicated because of the number of different laboratories and coauthors involved in many studies. The good news is that academic institutions, funders, and publishers are exploring new ways to clarify attribution,* and many publishers now require disclosure of specific contributions for scientific authorship. As part of this effort, it is critical that the problem of honorary authorship be effectively addressed. According to a recent report, honorary authors were attached to 25% of research reports, 15% of review articles, and 11% of editorials published in six major medical journals in 2008.† It is time to end this practice.

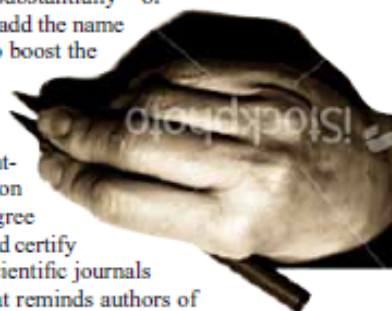
A true author is someone who has made substantive intellectual contributions to a study and is responsible for a component of the work. Honorary authorship violates this central principle. Why then is it so frequent? In some cases, honorary authorship amounts to “coercive authorship,” in which a senior person informs a junior colleague that the senior person must be listed as an author, even though she/he did not contribute substantially—or not at all—to the work. In other cases, the principal investigator may add the name of a prominent scientist in the field as a guest author in an attempt to boost the paper’s chance of publication. Both types of behavior have fraudulent aspects, distorting the ethical culture that is central to a healthy academic environment.

To discourage honorary authorship and ensure appropriate accountability for published results, many journals have updated their policies on authorship. For some (including *Science*), all authors must formally agree to be listed as authors, specify their contributions to the manuscript, and certify that they approve of its content and submission to the journal. But scientific journals could go even further by adding a statement on authorship forms that reminds authors of their accountability in the event of challenges to the veracity or integrity of the work, such as “By signing this statement, I acknowledge that I take credit for the content of the published work. I also acknowledge that I will take responsibility for the work if questions arise in the future as to its authenticity and credibility.” Such a statement would serve as a firm reminder that being inappropriately listed as an author has negative consequences if the results are challenged or retracted.

Research institutions should develop and promulgate clear statements in their research policies about the importance of upholding ethical standards of authorship. For example, Washington University in St. Louis‡ defines both guest and gift authorship as research misconduct, whereby “guest (honorary, courtesy, or prestige) authorship is defined as granting authorship out of appreciation or respect for an individual, or in the belief that expert standing of the guest will increase the likelihood of publication, credibility, or status of the work”



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Guest Authorship and Ghostwriting in Publications Related to Rofecoxib

A Case Study of Industry Documents From Rofecoxib Litigation

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JAMA, April 16, 2008—Vol 299, No. 15

Ghostwriting


Failure to designate as an author an individual who has made a substantial contribution to the research or writing of a manuscript, such as when manuscripts are prepared by industry representatives on behalf of academics, where the role of the company is not disclosed.

From Ross, 2015



Guest authorship refers to the designation of an individual as an author who does not meet authorship criteria, for example, when academics are invited to be authors of manuscripts prepared by industry representatives after studies have been completed, crediting the investigator with a role that is not commensurate with their contributions in an attempt to convey academic objectivity.

From Ross, 2015



Guest authorship also occurs in academic settings, such as when **senior academics are named as authors on articles that were written by junior faculty and to which they did not meaningfully contribute.** Both practices undermine the integrity of clinical research.

From Ross, 2015

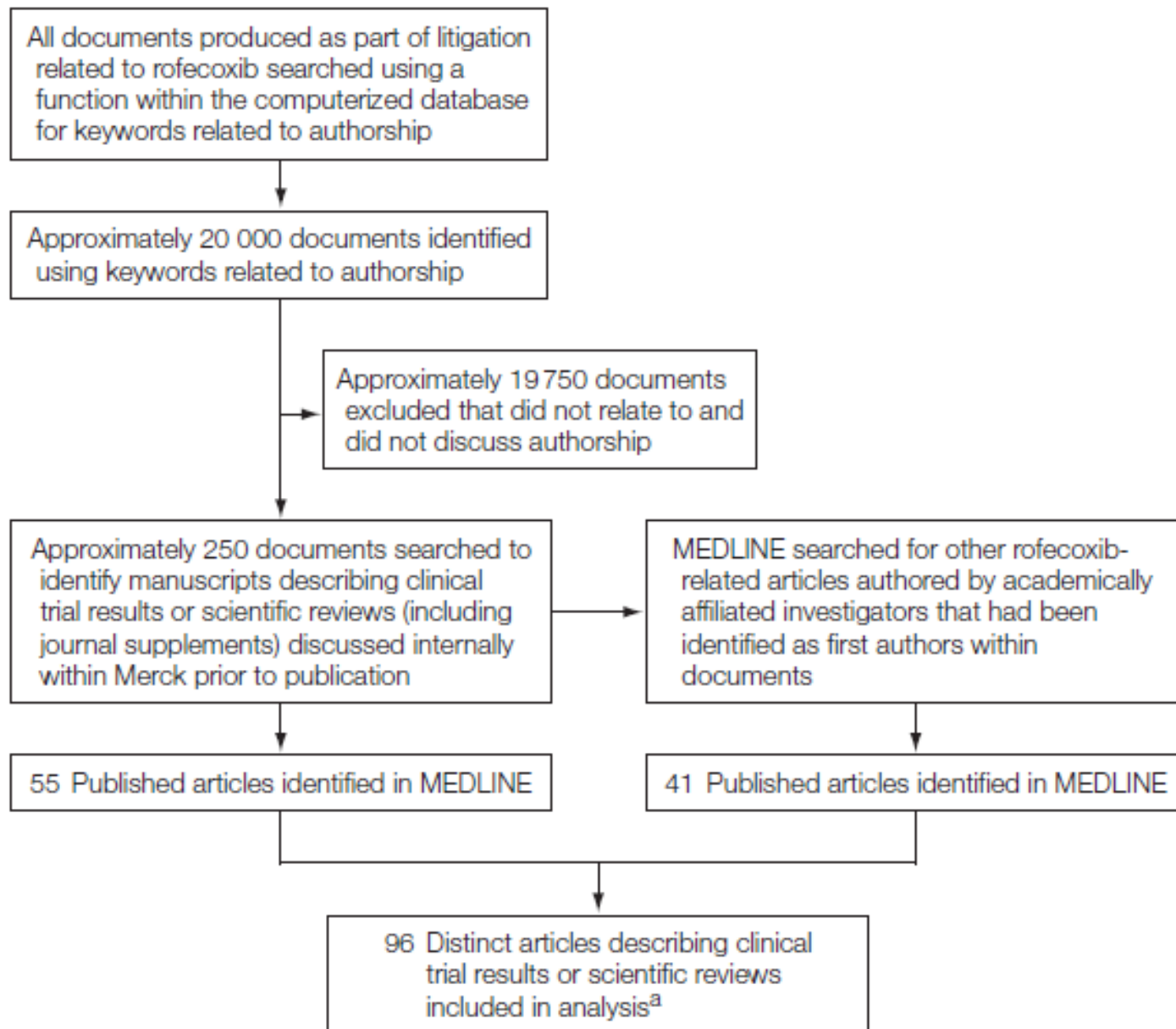
Guest Authorship Is Common – at least in Medicine

- In 1998, guest authorship (honorary authorship) was identified in 16% of research articles, 26% of review articles, and 21% of editorials in a survey of 6 peer-reviewed medical journals (1998).
- 2002: 41% of Cochrane reviews contained a guest author.

JAMA – 2008 – Ross, et al.

- Litigation against Merck & Co, Inc. related to rofecoxib provided a unique opportunity to examine the practice of guest authorship and ghostwriting related to research and promotion of this medication.
- The objective of this study was to provide a review using a case-study exploration of court documents to describe the practice of **guest authorship and ghostwriting** related to rofecoxib.

Figure 1. Document and Manuscript Identification Flowchart



Clinical Trial Manuscripts: Guest Authors

- When publishing their own clinical trials (designed, conducted, and sponsored by Merck), documents were found describing Merck scientists **often** working to prepare manuscripts and subsequently **recruiting** external, academically affiliated investigators to collaborate on the manuscript as **guest authors**.
- Example: a randomized, double-blind study to investigate whether rofecoxib could delay the onset of Alzheimer disease in patients with mild cognitive impairment) was designed and conducted principally by scientists at Merck.

Clinical Trial Manuscripts: Guest Authors

- Both the title and the authorship were modified to **attribute authorship to 3 academically affiliated investigators** (first, second, and third authors) on the published article, in addition to the 8 Merck scientists who are attributed authorship on both the draft and published versions of the manuscript (1 Merck scientist is attributed authorship on the draft but not the final manuscript).
- Only 1 of the 3 academically affiliated investigators who are attributed authorship on the published article was acknowledged in the draft version as a participating investigator in the rofecoxib study group.
- Documents were found describing other examples of Merck recruiting external, academically affiliated investigators to collaborate as **guest authors** on manuscripts prepared by Merck scientists.

Clinical Trial Manuscripts: Guest Authors

- The academically affiliated authors of the Vioxx GI Outcomes Research (VIGOR) study, in response to an expression of concern by the *New England Journal of Medicine*, made a point of asserting that **no Merck employee or representative was involved in the drafting of their response**, but do not discuss who drafted the manuscript and with respect to cardiovascular events allude to **not developing the analysis plan, not having access to the data, and not performing the analyses**.
- Merck's performance of the analyses was confirmed by the Merck-affiliated authors.

Review Papers and Honorary Authorship and Ghost Writers

- Documents were found describing Merck employees contracting with medical publishing companies to ghost-write review manuscripts focused on rofecoxib and subsequently recruiting external, academically affiliated investigators to be guest (honorary) authors.
- For example, an e-mail from representatives of Scientific Therapeutics Information to Merck employees provided an update on the development and estimated delivery dates for 8 manuscripts related to rofecoxib that the company was preparing, including intended titles, authors, and journals.
- 42 Review articles were identified by 7 of the 8 investigators, several with titles nearly exactly as proposed by the ghost writers.

Review Papers

- Documents were found demonstrating that medical publishing companies provided near complete drafts of review manuscripts to authors for editing, in addition to managing submissions and revisions.
- Example: in preparing one manuscript, representatives from Scientific Therapeutics Information indicated in a publications status report that the first draft was sent to Merck and the company was awaiting comments, but an author needed to be invited.

Review Papers

- Documents were found describing Merck **compensating investigators** with honoraria for agreeing to serve as authors on review manuscripts ghostwritten on their behalf by medical publishing companies. Honoraria varied, ranging from \$750 to \$2500.
- One author refused his honorarium from Scientific Therapeutics Information stating, “I really do not feel it is appropriate to be paid for this **type of effort.**”

Conclusions - 2008

- Authors said they were hopeful that their findings would encourage discussion of ways in which to improve the integrity of research.
- The medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry should agree that collaborations must be conducted with the highest standards.
- Authors suggested that academic researchers should consistently provide to the journals the author contributions for all manuscripts, including original research, meta-analyses, reviews, and commentaries, and disclose relationships and support from all industry sources, regardless of the journal's requirements.

Conclusions - 2008

- Authors who “signoff” on or “edit” original manuscripts or reviews written explicitly by pharmaceutical industry employees or by medical publishing companies should offer full authorship disclosure, such as, “drafting of the manuscript was done by representatives from XYZ, Inc; the authors were responsible for critical revisions of the manuscript for important intellectual content.”
- A coordinated oversight strategy involving academic physicians, journal editors, and industry representatives is necessary to discourage both guest authorship and ghostwriting and improve the integrity of the biomedical authorship system.

On Ghosts and Other Unwelcome Guests

Joseph S. Ross, MD, MHS^{1,2,3,4}

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From Ross, 2015

“Ten years ago, there were ghosts everywhere in clinical research. There were ghosts writing review articles. There were ghosts writing editorials. And there were ghosts writing articles describing the results of clinical trials. And, along with these ghosts, there were many uninvited guests—individuals who were named as authors but who had not contributed substantively to the writing or the design and conduct of the studies.”

From Ross, 2015

- “Ghosts and guests persisted in part because the culture of research accepted, or at least tolerated, these practices.”
- Many academic authors, as well as representatives from industry, believed ghostwriting and guest authorship to be acceptable and mutually beneficial.
- Academics are promoted and receive recognition on the basis of productivity, so receiving writing assistance or being named as an author to a few additional publications was useful for professional advancement.
- In addition, so long as the academics closely reviewed the article and edited its content to ensure that it reflected their perspectives intellectually, the practice could be **rationalized as harmless and justified.**

From Ross, 2015

- **In response**, academic medical centers began establishing formal policies that expressly prohibited ghostwriting and guest authorship, the extent of which is monitored by the American Medical Student Association (AMSA) Scorecard on conflict of interest policies.
- Similarly, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), the trade organization representing U.S. pharmaceutical companies, updated its voluntary code of conduct to discourage these practices.

From Ross, 2015

- In addition, the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) updated its recommendations to define the role of authors and contributors, establishing clear criteria for evaluating authorship.
- As part of this update, the ICMJE expressly acknowledged that writing assistance can enhance the clinical research dissemination process, and that while medical writers who do not meet the criteria should not be named as authors, they should be acknowledged in the article.

From Ross, 2015

- “But more should be done, including clear repercussions for academic authors who continue to utilize ghostwriters and guest author articles, inappropriately taking credit for research in which they did not participate.”
- Biomedical journals might consider retracting these articles, questioning the veracity of their research findings.
- Clinical research funders, including the National Institutes of Health, might consider permanent or temporary bans on these investigators receiving research support.
- But at the very least, academic medical centers need to take this information into account when making promotion and leadership decisions.
- Ghostwriting and guest authorship undermine the integrity of clinical research and should no longer be tolerated.

Authorship Policies

Three principal sources of guidance and policy on scientific authorship are:

(1) Publishers

(2) Scientific societies

(3) Editorial associations and committees

- Publishers provide guidance in the form of Instructions for Authors and journal publication policies. Instructions for Authors and formal publication policies are often linked to one another covering similar topics in varying degrees of detail.
- Several scientific societies have published freestanding guidelines for authorship.

Authorship



2. Who Is an Author?

The ICMJE recommends that authorship be based on the following 4 criteria:

1. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND
2. Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND
3. Final approval of the version to be published; AND
4. Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Recommendations

Conflicts of Interest

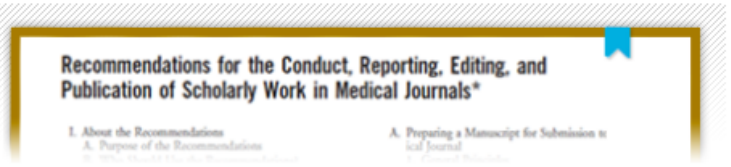
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About ICMJE

The ICMJE is a small working group of general medical journal editors whose participants meet annually and fund their own work on the Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals. The ICMJE invites comments on this document and suggestions for agenda items.

The current members of the ICMJE are *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *British Medical Journal*, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, *Chinese Medical Journal*, *Ethiopian Journal of Health Sciences*, *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)*, *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde (The Dutch Medical Journal)*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *New Zealand Medical Journal*, *Revista Médica de Chile*, *PLOS (Public Library of Science)*, *Tidsskrift for Den Norske Lægeforening (The Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association)*, *The Lancet*, *Ugeskrift for Læger (Journal of the Danish Medical Association)*, the U.S. National Library of Medicine, and the World Association of Medical Editors.

Inquiries

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Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals

Updated December 2014

From the ICMJE

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF AUTHORS, CONTRIBUTORS, REVIEWERS, EDITORS, PUBLISHERS, AND OWNERS

Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors: Why Authorship Matters

- Authorship confers credit and has important academic, social, and financial implications. Authorship also implies responsibility and accountability for published work.
- The ICMJE recommendations are intended to ensure that contributors who have made substantive intellectual contributions to a paper are given credit as authors
- Also that contributors credited as authors understand their role in taking responsibility and being accountable for what is published.

Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals

Updated December 2014

From the ICMJE

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF AUTHORS, CONTRIBUTORS, REVIEWERS, EDITORS, PUBLISHERS, AND OWNERS: Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors, continued

- Because authorship does not communicate what contributions qualified an individual to be an author, some journals now request and publish information about the contributions of each person named as having participated in a submitted study, at least for original research.
- Editors have been encouraged to develop and implement a contributorship policy, as well as a policy that identifies who is responsible for the integrity of the work as a whole. Such policies remove much of the ambiguity surrounding contributions, but leave unresolved the question of the quantity and quality of contribution that qualify an individual for authorship.
- The ICMJE has developed criteria for authorship that can be used by all journals, including those that distinguish authors from other contributors.

ICMJE - Who Is an Author?

The ICMJE recommends that authorship be based on the following **4 criteria**:

1. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND
2. Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND
3. Final approval of the version to be published; AND
4. Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.
 - a. In addition to being accountable for the parts of the work he or she has done, an author should be able to identify which co-authors are responsible for specific other parts of the work.
 - b. In addition, authors should have confidence in the integrity of the contributions of their coauthors.

All those designated as authors should meet all four criteria for authorship, and all who meet the four criteria should be identified as authors. Those who do not meet all four criteria should be **acknowledged**, not listed as an “honorary author.”

The authorship criteria are intended to reserve the status of authorship for those who deserve credit and can take responsibility for the work. The criteria are not intended for use as a means to disqualify colleagues from authorship who otherwise meet authorship criteria by denying them the opportunity to meet criterion #s 2 or 3. Therefore, all individuals who meet the first criterion should have the opportunity to participate in the review, drafting, and final approval of the manuscript.

Summary and Conclusions

- Guest and ghost authorship were quite common – and anecdotes suggest that it remains a problem.
- Policies exist and should be disseminated and followed
- Mentors and research supervisors – what is their role in ending honorary authorship?
- How can junior researchers address this problem?

Questions?