

WHO'S THE AUTHOR?

All and every one of the names listed as authors of a scientific publication ought to be held equally responsible for its contents. This is a general ethical principle that, in theory, is fully accepted by the authors as well as by the publishers, although rather often some of those included have not contributed to its conception nor to its execution, and have not even read the paper in which they appear as authors. Some very strict publications and/or institutions require to declare which of the authors have participated in equal terms or in different conditions.

Current science and technology, in contrast with the situation prevailing only a couple of generations ago, when published papers authored by more than two authors were the exception to the rule, has acquired such characteristics that in many fields the research groups are very numerous and on occasions are of different disciplines. This is a lot more evident in the natural sciences than in the social sciences and the humanities. The modality most often used in cases of multiple authorship, although it is not a universal one, is that in which whoever writes the work, and who generally has conducted the research as well, appears as the first author, and the senior researcher or head of the unit appears as the last one. This modality is appropriate but is not universally applied, and leaves room for doubt and questioning.

In the cases of multiple authorship, the authors should designate by common agreement one corresponding author. The latter shall serve as the person responsible to the journal and to the readers. This author, in turn, should take upon himself the work of gathering the whole group in order to discuss in depth the contents of the paper and assure that they have revised the form and essence of the document to be submitted.

In many institutions where publishing papers is mandatory in order to be promoted and even to complement the salary of professors and researchers, many of the members of

the laboratory in which the work was carried out, or of the corresponding institutions, are incorporated into the authors list without having contributed significantly to the publication. For all of them it will count as one more paper. At the other extreme, however, there are institutions where only the responsible author, and only he or she is recognized and even receives a monetary compensation.

The truth is that since the academic doctrine of publish or perish was established, and currently it is widely disseminated and applied, the incorporation in lists of authors and the subdivision of results in small portions, each one of which gives birth to another report have become the main strategies to swell the indices of individual and institutional productivity. This takes place without leading to any benefit to the scientific community nor to society.

The role of journal editorial bodies and of referees must be a determining guide. They can watch for unjustifiable irregularities whose rectification must be required in all cases. Such are, for instance, the withdrawal or inclusion of authors once a paper has been refereed and accepted, or mistakes and faults that clearly would not exist if such or such author would have read attentively the paper in question.

The cases in which it is detected that a group of professors allow students to prepare the manuscripts to be submitted without exercising any control regarding the form and the essence of the contents are numerous. In this manner, they permit papers with relevant faults to be submitted for publication including their names as coauthors.

An interesting option would be to eliminate the concept of corresponding author, indicating in every case the e-mail address of all the coauthors, a modality that is certainly feasible in this digital era.

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