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Original Article

Guest Author and Ghost Author: My Experience as an Editor of a Medical Journal

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Abstract: The author (s) of a scientific article should have contributed to a research article in a meaningful and substantive way. A person who contributes to the research but whose name is excluded from the authors' list is known as a ghost author. Whereas a guest author doesn't contribute in a meaningful way to the research and preparation of the manuscript, however, appears on the author's byline. Often, guest authors are influential persons invited by the principal author to get favours later. Gift authorship often involves mutual authorship among the articles of colleagues and vice-versa. The inclusion of ghost authors, guests, or gift authors is common in the district town's journal of Noakhali. This article was written to express my ten years of experience regarding the malpractices of authorship of a medical journal as an editor of a medical journal. It is a common phenomenon that after a few days of submitting an article to the editor's office, the principal author requests to insert another author or to change the order of the author's position. Members of the editorial board and reviewer of the article insert their names as authors violating the ICMJE (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors) guidelines. Course on authorship should be almost important to change the trend of our current culture in publishing articles, especially district medical college Journals.

Keywords: guest author, ghost author, authorship

Introduction: For most of the cases medical teachers of Bangladesh require publication in journals for promotion in job¹. Physicians who have the required number of publications in

recognized journals for fulfilling the required tenure in the previous post, secured satisfactory marks in annual confidential reports (ACR), and fulfilling the required service lengths

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are eligible for promotion¹. A few teachers publish their articles for reputations in their area of expertise resulting in national and international recognition, for better credentials for research grant applications and for increasing expertise in their field of clinical practice¹. All of these outcomes are considered benefits of publication in medical journals². Authorship of the manuscript suggested that the authors should be credited with the creation of new knowledge, giving new solutions, or providing new insights in research that may add up to existing literature.³ As the 'publish and perish' nature and flourishing nowadays, professional misconduct or malpractices are prevailing in authorships also.⁴ Research on post-graduate medical students showed that the majority of students (76.87%) did not know the authorship criteria.⁵

A ghost author is a person who has made a substantial contribution to the research or writing of a manuscript but is not named as an author.⁶ Those who make technical contributions that would not qualify them as an author, rather they should be listed in the acknowledgments with the extent of their contribution clearly stated. However, in some cases, some of those acknowledged may meet the criteria of authorship, and so even though acknowledged, they are technically ghosts.

A guest author is someone who is named as an author, but who did not contribute in a meaningful way to the design, research, analysis, or writing of a paper⁷. Often they are well-known and well-respected leaders in the field of interest who are paid for use of their name⁷. Some physicians might be invited by the corresponding author to repay favours such as professional references or referrals.⁸ The presence of a well-known guest author poses a substantial risk because the author's name could unfairly influence the opinion of clinicians, educators, and politicians about a particular drug or device.⁹

A simple statement is that all who contribute substantially should be listed as authors byline, and all who are listed as authors should have contributed substantially. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. The journal committee is

always facing the problems of ghosts and guest authors¹⁰. Therefore, in this article, I expressed my experience regarding ghost authors and guest authors as an editor of Abdul Malek Ukil Medical College Journal.

Materials and methods: This article was written at Abdul Malek Ukil Medical College, in the district town of Noakhali, Bangladesh, during the period from June to July 2023. The editorial team calls papers for specific issues of our journal. For the literature survey, Google Scholar and Pubmed as search engines were used. Key words were: authorship, guest author, ghost author, and gift author for searching the literature. In this article, I express my experience as an editor.

Experience as an editor: Articles are submitted for a special issue. After a few days of submission, the submitter requests to add a new author, remove an existing author, and/or change the order of authors. The request also comes from the person who is not related to the study to include him as an author. Again, influential members of the editorial board add themselves or nearer one as an author of the article without the consent of the principal investigator. Also, I have seen, a common practice of including the spouse's name as an author without his/her any contribution to the study. Further, a peer reviewer requests the editors to add an author. Similarly, professional leaders, political leaders, juniors, seniors, or colleagues request the author/editors to add them as authors to help them in their promotions.

Discussion: My study is a new one in Bangladesh. So, classic discussion is not possible by comparing and contrasting my experiences with those of others from Bangladesh. However, I try to relate my study with some published literature in the field of authorship. The authorship of articles must be honest, reliable, trustworthy, and transparent. Otherwise, the reader cannot adequately appraise the paper. Therefore, The CMJE and other groups have issued guidelines for authorship.^{6,10}

Using the ICMJE criteria if the medical writers do not qualify as authors, but their involvement and funding source should be acknowledged.¹¹

A guest or gift author or ghost authors often involves reciprocal agreement for CV enhancement (i.e. including colleagues on papers in return for being listed on theirs)¹¹. Ghost and guest authorships are unprofessional and unethical. However, the most important and underlying issue is that ghost and guest authors may have the potential to manipulate patient care through their influence on physicians and educators.⁹ Such authorships deprive the reader of the chance to satisfactorily weigh a published paper.⁹

Usually, honorific or “gift” authorship takes place when a subordinate (or junior) person lists a senior person as an author, even if that person did not meet the authorship criteria.^{5,6} Bestowing the gift to a Chief, Chair, Department Head, Director, Dean, or such other person is often done in gratitude, but carries an unspoken expectation that the favor will be returned in the future.¹² Indeed, it can also be bestowed under coercive conditions.^{12,13}

Conclusion: In my perspective, Abdul Malek Ukil Medical College Journal is practicing ghost, guest, hired writership, and more so. Senior/superior fellows are mostly responsible for these types of malpractices regarding authorship and they should be more generous and conservative in requesting juniors to make him an author without required contribution. Research showed that the majority of students (76.87%) did not know the authorship criteria in bangladesh. After the intervention of education, 100% understand the authorship criteria⁴. Workshops and seminars are needed to educate medical teachers regarding authorship to change the current situation of our ill culture in publishing articles.

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