The delicate topic of authorship—2011 update

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Disputes could be reduced if authorship criteria were agreed, in writing, among all contributors at the start of a research project [1].

The last editorial in Graefe's dedicated solely to this topic appeared over 6 years ago [2]. Due to an increase in authors with queries regarding authorship and submitted papers with authorship issues and non-compliance with the ICMJE guidelines [3], another editorial followed [4] which introduced the authorship form.

Since lately some authorship issues have again arisen, we feel it is a timely subject to revisit and discuss.

In Germany, the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation) published guidelines in 1998 where only two points discuss authorship, and both are very brief on the matter [5]. The guidelines have to our knowledge not been updated since. In the meantime, there have been many updates, publications and even new organisations founded which also explain and try to offer solutions to authorship and ethical aspects of manuscript submission [6–8].

Springer Publishers in 2009 produced a document entitled “Springer Policy on Publishing Integrity”. This document has a section allocated to authorship which is for the use of the editors when dealing with ethical or problematic issues with papers.

As is known, this journal complies with the ICMJE (International Committee of Journal Medical Editors) guidelines. Therefore all named authors must a) be prepared

to take credibility for the research which was undertaken, and b) have contributed substantially to the research study.

Credibility—this is the author's name and that of the institute. The reputation and public responsibility of both the author and the institute are related to the paper.

Contribution—in accordance with ICMJE guidelines, the contribution consists of the following: [3]

- A) substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data;
- B) drafting the article, or revising it critically for important intellectual content;
- C) final approval of the version to be published.

The problems which occur with authorship seem to happen in the following instances:

Gift authorship/guest authorship—an individual who did not make a significant contribution to the whole paper and therefore does not fulfill the ICMJE criteria [9]. A good example of this could be of an individual who initially described a method but did not contribute to the paper submitted, or alternatively an individual who operated initially on a patient but when preparing a retrospective study was not active in the actual preparation of the manuscript for publication. Examples of gift/guest authorship could be of a senior figure (head of department), someone who provides technical help, writing assistance and so on.

Individuals who contribute to the paper but do not qualify for authorship should be acknowledged, for example *We acknowledge Anne Example, who critically reviewed the study proposal/served as scientific advisor/critically reviewed the study proposal/collected data/provided and cared for study patients/and so on...*

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Ghost Authorship—professional/medical writers should not be named authors but acknowledged. Failure to do so turns them into ghost writers; this can mask the involvement of a commercial sponsor [10]

Authorship in revised papers—following the revision an authors name has been added/deleted:

Adding an authors name. Due to the nature of the peer-review process, the comments of reviewers can be comprehensive. There may be the need to ask for further advice, and it is important to ensure the overall contribution of the added author complies with the ICMJE guidelines.

Removal of an authors name. Although rare, an author can decide to have his or her name removed from the authorship list of a paper. This is possible, but all named authors must agree and a reason must be provided.

The editorial office has a prepared template letter which can be used when adding/removing an author. This letter can be sent upon request, and we hope to have a section of sample letters on the editorial office web site shortly: www.di-ep.com

Statistical input. In Graefe's, a statistician can be a named author. We understand the input that statisticians make to papers and the long-term input that follows.

Limits of named authors

Graefe's implements a strict policy and limits the number of named authors on papers:

Original papers are limited to nine named authors—exceptions are allowed, but this is rare and the Editor-in-Chiefs' decision is final.

Case Reports are limited to five named authors.

Letters to the Editor have a limit of four named authors.

The corresponding author bears the responsibility of perusing the journal's instructions for authors prior to submission and ensuring that the paper is in full compliance with the format of the journal.

Possible solutions to authorship problems [9]:

1. Encourage a culture of ethical authorship—ensure your university or hospital department has at least one book on publication ethics.

2. Start discussing authorship when you plan your research. Continue to discuss ideas about authorship as the project develops and as new people may become involved with the research.
3. Before you start working on the article, decide the authorship. This could be confirmed in writing amongst the group. Any changes should be noted.

Please note that the authorship form must be signed by all named authors prior to submission of the paper—it would be of great help if institutions endorsed this practice, since many conflicts of authorship could be easily avoided [11, 12].

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