Editorial: when to be an author?

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The number of authors on a scientific work is highly variable and differs between disciplines. In the field of law, for instance, most works are monographies by single author while in astronomy, more than 1000 authors are quite common. In the medical field, it is rare that a research article is written by a single author. I give an example in the literature review in this issue [1]. The series of reviews [2–7] I write for this Journal is another, but they are really a personal selection of articles from the literature with my own opinion on them. In fact, outside this series, I have written only one other single author article [8], which has been cited more than 100 times, but would have been much more influential if I had included other authors, more knowledgeable on the topic: I describe merely a new feature in salivary gland tumors, but, as hematopathologist, I failed to recognize that I was actually dealing a new entity.

There are several guidelines on authorship and some rules are well accepted, at least in the medical field. Every author should have contributed to the article, must have seen and approved it before it is submitted, and is fully responsible for the content. It is also widely accepted that mere being the head of a department or contributing cases is not sufficient for an authorship; this is better referred to in an acknowledgement. But there remain issues. The order of authors is not always seen the same. Generally, the first author is the one writing the first draft, and the last author is the person who has started the work and supervises the whole process, but that is not always the case. Some feel that the corresponding author is the most important person for the work, others leave this to the first author. Some journals

ask for detailed information on each individual contribution, which becomes cumbersome when more than 1000 authors are included. To acknowledge that research is always teamwork, it has been suggested to leave out authorship altogether and write articles on behalf of teams. This latter option might seem attractive but goes against human nature. It is nice to see your name in print (although nowadays rarely really printed), and persons like to be able to show what they have contributed to science.

I have no complete solution, but transparency and decency are the basic rules and trust is the key. In these times of fake news, anonymous contributors in harsh debates and loss of trust in authority, it is important that we, as scientists, recognize and take our responsibility. In the end, we should remember, that it is the quality, not the quantity of our work that is really relevant, and one will be remembered because of the real contribution to the well-being of patients. To remember this in discussions on authorship might bring some relief.

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