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Some Perils of Authorship

When scientists collaborate on a paper, jealousy, grievance, and misunderstanding can seriously threaten the team effort. Few believe that authorship should not be acknowledged at all; authors enjoy seeing their names in print, and parts of their careers depend upon it. This being so, let us look at a few current practices regarding authorship that may lead to misunderstanding.

How should the authors' names be arranged? Some men almost routinely put their names first if they are the head of the laboratory. They may have done none of the so-called "bench work," but that does not matter. There can be no doubt that many an author has gotten kudos and a large reputation as a result of always being the "first" author. The other extreme is the man who is always listed last, or whose name does not appear at all.

There is thus created much misunderstanding of the significance of the arrangement of authors' names. We are apt to surmise that the first-named author did the work, that it was his own special idea, or that he was young and needed the push.

The problem of how many names to include and of the individual's position within a laboratory or clinic has been another source of trouble. Some journals simply refuse to accept a paper with more than three or four names. Others will take ten or more. Some laboratories include names of technicians or medical students, and others do not.

Editors of journals have created a jungle in regard to authorship by having no uniform system of citation in the body of an article or in the bibliography. Some American journals and authors cut references to a bare and arbitrary minimum and give the citation only by number. A few journals not only limit the number of references arbitrarily but refer in both text and bibliography only to the first author; the rest automatically become "*et al.*" This could guarantee anonymity for everyone but the one who heads the list.

These problems have caused me more conscience-searching and concern than any other scientific activity of which I can think. I have no complete answers, but I do have some suggestions.

The order of names in a by-line is important and should be agreed on before the manuscript is written. The first author should be the one most intimately concerned with both the work and the writing. This does not mean that he alone is responsible. All the authors must be capable of assuming full responsibility for the results, their presentation, and their interpretation. Authorship should not be made so diffuse, through inclusion of every possible participant, technical or otherwise, that it becomes meaningless. Editors should recognize that all authors of a manuscript are concerned to varying degrees with important aspects of the work. Consequently their names should not be relegated to limbo by use of "*et al.*" Given the opportunity, and a little experience, most people turn out to be fair. Observance of these principles should encourage cooperation among colleagues.

—IRVINE H. PAGE, *Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, Ohio.*