

## Authorship pressures, malpractices and ethical issues

The present academic climate in the country as a consequence of regulations requiring minimum number of publications for tenure and promotion has led to fierce competition which is not always healthy. To complicate matters the sequence of authors can decide the fate of one's academic career. For instance, the Medical Council of India (MCI) accepts only the first and second authors while granting academic credit.<sup>1</sup> One who has toiled the maximum for a paper should consider herself lucky if she retains the first or second slot in the final authorship sequence. One of the delicate issues concerns the final list and sequence of co-authors. Though explicit guidelines on authorship exist,<sup>2</sup> implementation poses dilemmas for a researcher low down in the academic hierarchy.

The medical profession always seems to land up at the receiving end. Though it has been opined that doctors are not scientists,<sup>3</sup> research publications are expected from them. Even professional scientists in full time research are not prolific writers. It would surprise most of us to learn that in the US, no more than 20% of scientists have a peer reviewed paper to their credit.<sup>4</sup> Peter Higgs, the British scientist on his way to receive the Nobel Prize in 2013, ruefully remarked that no university would employ him today because he was not productive enough and would have been sacked had he not been nominated for the Nobel in 1980.<sup>5</sup> Nearer home, our former president, Late Shri A P J Abdul Kalam whose caliber as a scientist can never be doubted has modest research metrics with h-index of 8 and i10-index of 6, with hardly any original articles to his credit.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand the medical fraternity, as a result of well intentioned but ill conceived regulations is witnessing a rat race for publications which lead to a number of authorship malpractices. Besides, the usual ethical issues such as gift authorship, ghost authorship, plagiarism and duplication of works,<sup>7</sup> the publication rat race has led to evolving unethical practices such as purchasing and selling authorship<sup>4,8</sup> and hacking of journal websites by unscrupulous authors to review their own papers by creating fake referee identities.<sup>9</sup> Authorship malpractices violate the four principles of ethics, i.e. respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice.<sup>10</sup>

Dhingra and Mishra explored authorship misconduct such as gift and ghost authorships, falsification and fabrication of data, plagiarism and "salami publication" among medical professionals from nine institutions across India.<sup>11</sup> They found that while 90% were aware about publication ethics only about 29% believed that they had adequate knowledge. The most

common authorship misconduct reported was gift authorship which was observed by 65.1% of the respondents. In 85% instances this "gift" was offered to a senior. Altering and fabrication of data by a known colleague was the next common misconduct at 56.7%. Having noticed plagiarism was reported by 53.5% and 33.4% reported ghost authorship practices where an investigator who deserves to be included as an author is dropped from the final list. Salami publication i.e., slicing up one study to publish multiple papers was seen by 32.9% while 20.6% reported having seen colleagues indulge in duplicate publications.

One particular incidence of plagiarism deserves mention because of the cruel irony. An article on guidelines to tackle plagiarism in Indian scenario was found to be itself plagiarized and had to be retracted.<sup>12</sup>

Academic bodies insisting on minimum number of publications by faculty have also not done their homework. There are just not enough genuine journals where medical teachers can submit their research work. Consequently, this has led to a manufacturing industry of fake or predatory journals a large proportion of them operating from India.<sup>13</sup>

What are the ethical issues arising out of this academic anarchy? Firstly, the principle of autonomy is compromised in haste and pressure to publish. This ipso facto is breach of autonomy of the faculty who may have no inner desire to undertake research but compelled to for reasons of tenure and promotion. Besides, the institution may be interested to make up the minimum number of professors and associate professors required to fulfill eligibility for post graduate courses. The pressure may tend to have a trickledown effect and the autonomy of study participants may also be breached particularly in developing countries where informed consent may not be "informed" in letter and spirit.<sup>14</sup>

Bad science done in haste has the potential to harm. Misleading findings mislead future researchers who may try to take the research issue further. Translation of findings of such research into practice can harm humanity. So the phenomenon of publish or perish can violate the ethical principle of non-maleficence.

Bad science does not benefit anyone. Authors of publications in predatory journals may seem to benefit in the short run but sooner or later the quality of their work will be exposed. As awareness about predatory journals becomes more prevalent in the academic community even short term benefits may also cease for such authors.

The principle of justice is also violated due to such well intentioned but ill conceived regulations mandating publications for academic tenure and promotion. Hardworking, creative, and diligent faculty who refuse to cut corners to meet the publication requirements by publishing in predatory journals will be left behind in the rat race. Besides, practices such as gift and ghost authorships are not just acts.

To conclude, academic regulatory bodies need to rethink publication criteria for medical faculty. They should keep in mind the nature of the medical profession and the research capability of doctors who are not scientists by training. Medical profession is very demanding with responsibilities of patient care and teaching leaving hardly any time for research. Realistic expectations will promote integrity. Unrealistic expectations beyond the core competence will promote unethical practices. For tenure and promotion overall performance of the faculty should be taken into consideration and not only one narrow area of research publication.

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