

## DO THE INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS OF PAKISTANI MEDICAL JOURNALS CONVEY ADEQUATE GUIDANCE FOR AUTHORSHIP CRITERIA?

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To analyze authorship guidance in the instructions to authors provided by Pakistani medical journals.

**Methodology:** This study of Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) indexed journals was conducted at Isra University, Hyderabad in June-July 2009. Instructions to authors of these journals were evaluated for the authorship guidance by two investigators separately. Analyses of discrepancies between two investigators were resolved by mutual discussions and consensus was achieved.

**Results:** Out of PMDC indexed 49 journals, instructions to authors of 37 (75.5%) journals were evaluated for the authorship guidance. Among these 37 journals, only six (16.2%) provided the proper International Committee of Medical Journals Editors (ICMJE) wording of authorship criteria whereas 17 (45.9%) just mentioned the links to general requirements for manuscripts submitted to the biomedical journals. About one third of the journals neither provided any authorship criteria nor any link to the general requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals.

**Conclusion:** The authorship guidance provided by instructions to authors of PMDC indexed journals is less than satisfactory and needs substantial improvement.

**KEYWORDS:** Authorship, Instructions, Authors, Contributors, Journals.

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## INTRODUCTION

The major objectives of listing the authors for every publication are to give credit for research work, to fix responsibility for authenticity of research and knowing the persons to whom any questions related to research work are to be directed by the readers. The credit of authorship is also considered a major parameter for promotions and appointments of clinicians especially in teaching institutions across the world. Disputes over authorship are reported to be increasing substantially and were considered to be the single most common reason for complaint in an earlier study.<sup>1</sup> Hence it becomes extremely important to maintain the fairness and accuracy

in deciding the authorship for any publication. For this purpose, the authorship guidelines have been formulated by various organizations including Council of Science Editors (CSE),<sup>2</sup> Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)<sup>3</sup> and International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE).<sup>4</sup> Among these, authorship rules mentioned in the uniform requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals formulated by ICMJE are endorsed by most of the biomedical journals and researchers. In this regard, the role of Instructions to authors acquires significant importance for defining the criteria of authorship for every individual journal.

The objectives of this study were to review the role of instructions to authors regarding the guidance to authorship rules in Pakistani medical journals.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at Isra University, Hyderabad, Pakistan in the months of June and July 2009. All medical journals indexed and approved by Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) were included in this study. The journals having no available issues for the years 2008 / 2009 or whose instructions to authors could not be accessed via website or published copy were excluded from this study.

Instructions to authors were evaluated on a pre-designed checklist for the authorship guidance by two investigators separately. The analyses of instructions having discrepancy were re-evaluated by both investigators simultaneously and the consensus was achieved by discussion. The frequencies and percentages of various types of guidance were calculated and compared with the published literature.

## RESULTS

There are 49 medical journals indexed by PMDC according to the most recent update from PMDC website. Among these, 12 journals either had no available issues for the years 2008-2009 or their instructions to authors could not be accessed despite all efforts. Hence these

journals were excluded from the study. The instructions to authors for remaining 37 journals were analyzed regarding their guidance for authorship criteria. Only six journals provided the proper ICMJE wording of authorship criteria. Among these, five mentioned the latest criteria whereas one mentioned the older criteria of pre-2001 period. One journal designed its own criteria on the basis of spirit of ICMJE criteria whereas another journal did not mention the specific authorship criteria itself but just mentioned this as proposed by PMDC. Seventeen journals did not provide any guidance regarding specific authorship criteria but just mentioned the links to general requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. The maximum number of authors was restricted to twelve by one of these journals. About one third of the journals neither provided wording of any authorship criteria nor any link to general requirements for manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals. Only one of these journals asked to mention the individual contributions. A detailed account of these observations is mentioned in Table-I.

## DISCUSSION

The authorship criteria in instructions to authors are an extremely important component of any biomedical journal as these provide a great opportunity to improve the accuracy, equity and transparency of listing authors and also to minimize the all forms of authorship abuses. The comprehensiveness and elaborateness of instructions to authors designed by the journals are considered to be associated with quality and impact factor of the journals. A study analyzing the relationship of instructions to authors with prestige based on Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) journal citation report ranking revealed that the level of a journal's prestige is directly proportional to the degree of elaborateness of its instructions to authors.<sup>5</sup> This observation was further supported by a study of eleven high impact anesthesia journals revealing that all of these journals addressed issues concerning avoidance of redundant publication and unjustifiable authorship.<sup>6</sup>

Table-I: Analysis of instructions to authors for authorship guidance (n = 37)

<i>Instruction</i>	<i>Journals</i>
No guidance	12 (32.4%)
No authorship criteria but links to General requirements for manuscripts submission to biomedical journals as mentioned in:	17 (45.9%)
* New England Journal of Medicine 1997	5 (13.5%)
* JAMA 1997	1 (2.7%)
* British Medical Journal 1991	5 (13.5%)
* ICMJE	6 (16.2%)
ICMJE wording:	6 (16.2%)
* Current criteria	5 (13.5%)
* Old criteria	1 (2.7%)
Own criteria	1 (2.7%)
Authorship criteria as proposed by PMDC	1 (2.7%)

There is much more emphasis and interest in upholding the standards of ethical conduct in the pursuit of high powered scientific investigation nowadays than ever before.<sup>7</sup> This observation can be supported from the fact that a study evaluating instructions to authors of about 103 English language biomedical journals reported rise in the number of journals reporting the authorship criteria from 40% in 1995 to 72% in 2005.<sup>8</sup>

About 32.4% of the analyzed journals in this study did not mention any guidance related to authorship rules and this can be favorably compared with rates of 41% and 85% reported in two other international studies.<sup>9,10</sup> In this study, the proper ICMJE wording was used by about 16.2% of the journals in their instructions to authors as compared to another study reporting this rate to be 11%.<sup>9</sup> The current version of ICMJE wording in this study was observed in about 13.5% of the journals as compared to 7% reported in another study.<sup>9</sup> The obsolete version of ICMJE wording was mentioned by about 2.7% of the journals as compared to the rates of 4% and 24.6% reported in the earlier studies.<sup>9,11</sup> Only 2.7% of the journals in this study mentioned any restriction to the number of authors and this rate is consistent with the rate of 3.4% reported in another study.<sup>9</sup> None of the journals in a study of 20 Brazilian journals asked

for mentioning the contribution of individual authors and this finding is comparable to the rate of 2.7% asking to mention the contributions of individual authors in the current study.<sup>10</sup> This observation is in contrast to another study mentioning this rate to be about 9%.<sup>9</sup> The listing of contributions can help a lot in solving the difficulties of determining authorship and of devising criteria that apply to every situation.<sup>12</sup> This method of listing the contributions can further help the editors to detect the ghost or guest authors and to educate authors about authorship criteria especially if forms for collecting such information are well designed.<sup>13</sup>

In view of the observations of this study as well as the above comparisons, one can draw a conclusion that this golden opportunity is being missed by a vast majority of journals. The awareness of authorship criteria among the researchers was reported to be 51% to 65% in the earlier studies.<sup>14,15</sup> The present status of authorship abuse can be improved substantially by journal editors by agreeing on clear guidelines and educating potential authors about these via their instructions.<sup>9</sup> It is also argued that if scientists are dishonest about their relationship to work then the confidence in reporting of work itself is substantially undermined.<sup>3</sup> Deliberate abuse will probably remain hard to detect and prevent but clear guidance from journal editors

in the form of well designed and comprehensive instructions to authors and the provision of contribution disclosure statements will provide tremendous help in minimizing this menace.<sup>13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The level of guidance regarding authorship criteria provided by the instructions to authors in Pakistani Biomedical Journals is less than satisfactory but comparable to the published international literature. The introduction of a well designed contribution disclosure form as well as the improvement in authorship criteria awareness among researchers are expected to improve the present status substantially.

*Limitation of the Study:* The study is confined to the instructions to authors of medical journals originating from Pakistan only and thus the findings cannot be generalized regionally or globally.

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