

# Editorial

## Multiple authors — an ethical dilemma

The aura surrounding authorship of scientific publications has been cheapened in recent years by the cancerous proliferation of coauthors on papers.

How can it take five full-time faculty members at a major dental school to write a three-page paper? The paper in question was published recently in a mid-western regional dental journal and actually had *six* authors. The other author was a dental student who probably did all the work while the other authors “supervised” or perhaps just went along for the ride to tenure heaven.

This journal has observed, over the past years, a worrisome increase in the number of authors attached to papers. In the past, single, double, or sometimes triple authorship was the rule. Now it is not unusual to see six to ten, or even more, authors on some papers that, it would appear, could be done in a garage laboratory by one person in a matter of hours.

Just look at the table of contents of any journal these days. Chances are, many of the articles will have four or more authors. In the annual publication of abstracts in the *Journal of Dental Research*, for example, it is not unusual to see many authors on a series of papers in which the lists of authors merely change order. The projects, however, may be from totally different fields of interest. The “teamwork” approach taken a little too far, perhaps?

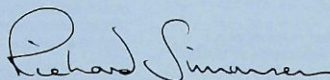
It is with regret that from this month on *Quintessence International* will be requiring all authors on all papers to support their participation by attesting to the fact that they participated *creatively* in the research project or paper. Technical assistance, statistical collaboration, data collection, secretarial support, or support from a departmental chairperson or dean does not warrant coauthorship unless the activity also contributed creatively to the project. Noncreative contributory assistance should be attested to in an acknowledgment.

It is disheartening that such a step is required. It should not be necessary. But it is. A “test” of this

system resulted in a paper in which six authors were reduced to two without so much as a question from the eminent senior author. Some authors have even taken to apologizing in cover letters for the number of authors and have complained about the pressure from the head of their department. Pressure not only to include the chairperson, but also to include colleagues who did not participate in any meaningful way, yet who are soon coming up for tenure consideration. While it is more common in Europe and Japan for departmental chairpersons to insist on being included on all papers emanating from their department, this also happens in the United States.

Such a system takes advantage of those who are dependent on the head of the department for employment and support. It is, therefore, hard for the true workers to complain — their very jobs may be at risk. Meanwhile the chairperson is, in effect, stealing partial credit and diminishing the real share that the other author(s) deserve. It is to be hoped that this archaic system of legal theft under duress will soon be put to rest. For publication in this journal in the future, heads of the department will have to sign a letter attesting to creative participation if they wish to be included as a coauthor.

It is unfortunate that many honest and creative teams will now come under unwarranted scrutiny as the result of abuse of the system by some. However, I believe this system will increase the value of coauthorship in the future and it will also take the pressure off many hard-working authors whose ethical limits are being tested by situations over which they may not have any control.



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