

# ETHICS OF MEDICAL AUTHORSHIP

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Ethics is an integral part of Medical practice. Bioethics, Research Ethics or even Ethics of Medical Authorship all are of paramount importance. The subject of Medical Ethics is very much in vogue these days. Recent advances in medicine and technological advances have highlighted the ethical issues medical practice. Declaration of Helsinki, adopted in June 1994 and finally approved in 2002<sup>1</sup> is a document of ethical principles in medical research involving human subjects. This editorial will focus mainly on the ethics of medical authorship as well as medical research.

Ethics of medical writing should be remembered and applied throughout a research project, from planning of the study to its completion. The ethics begin to apply even before the study is started, during the study period, and later when the manuscript is written, reviewed and finally published. The reason for performing a study and for publishing its results is the first ethical point to consider. Research is conducted to provide new evidence which in turn improve the health care delivery. Research papers should be published keeping this objective of advancing the knowledge and the patient benefit in mind and not the author's promotion as is the case in so many instances especially in our country. The two frequent unethical practices that the authors indulge in are dual publications, a different version of previously published material and salami publication, where the author presents the data from one study in serial fashion in different papers. This unethical practice not only wastes the medical literature space, the reader's time but also is of no help in promoting medical research and accumulating new evidence.

A research study begins with a question. In order to answer that question a study is designed and literature is reviewed. The ethical way of literature search is to read the whole article rather than just an abstract and correctly cite the article and ensure that correct information is drawn from it. It is usually obvious from reviewing the submitted manuscripts that the author does not understand the content of the cited article and has

not read the whole article. It may sound a minor point but it is unethical to cite an article without reading it.

It is extremely important to address the rights of patients to be included in the study ie informed consent, confidentiality, beneficence etc. The Institutional Ethical Review Board/ Committee, during the process of according approval should make it certain that patient's rights are not compromised at all and they are fully informed of their rights as far as their inclusion in the study is concerned.

Ethics are also involved while preparing the manuscript, submitting it for publication and even managing its revision. Since the published material dictates the patient management, the foremost responsibility of the authors is that whatever they submit is absolute truth and the information is absolutely correct. The co authors should also be actively involved in preparing the manuscripts. They must go through the manuscript, make any suggestions and it is their ethical responsibility along with the principal author to approve the manuscript.

Submission of manuscript involves making a declaration that the study was original, the manuscript has not been submitted to any other journal and it has not been published in any other journal. Ethics are also involved at this stage of research and publication. But unfortunately there are examples in my experience that the authors while making the above declaration have already submitted the manuscript to two different journals. In other instance despite the statement that the data submitted has not been published before, but it was later found that in fact it was published in another journal.

The authors should not forget the principles of ethics even when they are asked to revise the manuscript by the reviewers. The authors sometimes take the editor or the reviewer's advice lightly or take it so seriously that they rather than correcting the manuscript accordingly decide to retract the manuscript or just do not respond, a practice we witness every day. It is obvious that the

sole purpose of the reviewer's intervention is to ensure that the final product is accurate and clear. The authors particularly in our part of the world should also take it as an opportunity to learn the art of manuscript writing and conducting research through the critical review process. In some instances no doubt, that it is pretty difficult to answer all the queries of the reviewers but the author should try to answer the questions that he can and also honestly state the reasons for not being able to answer the others. He should honestly confess to any weakness in the design of the study when it becomes evident at this stage of the publication and work in collaboration with the reviewers and editor to provide best possible information to the readers.

The issue of multiple authors also requires ethical consideration. Each author should have ideally contributed to the study in one or the other way, i.e. design of the study, collection of data, and writing of the manuscript etc. This ethical behavior is required of each and every author listed on a manuscript<sup>2</sup>. It is unethical to add a name to appear on a manuscript unless he has contributed. It is however, noted with concern that in many instances the co authors names are just added for the sake of their curriculum vitae. Each author and co author must share ethical responsibilities and should be able to defend the manuscript.

Fraud no doubt is upsetting, but should be considered in medical literature. "Betrayers of the Truth: Fraud and Deceit in the Halls of Science", by Broad and Wade, make it evident that fraud is rampant in medical writing<sup>3</sup>. Fraud, whether it is in the form of publishing the articles of other authors and just changing the authors names or by writing a manuscript with fictitious data, or even inserting a name of a co author who has not contributed are different forms of fraud or plagiarism.

Plagiarism, a term commonly used for intellectual theft has been found in all form of writings including the medical literature. Plagiarism has many forms some very extreme and others so subtle that the authors do not appreciate that they are involved in an unethical practice. The term plagiarism is an act to publish something under one's own name which belongs to others without giving due recognition to the source. Fortunately there are many softwares which can detect plagiarism and it is a requirement by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan that every recognized journal must run a plagiarism scan on every submitted article before it is approved for publication. This practice I am sure will go a long way in curbing the ubiquitous culture of plagiarism.

Authors of a medical manuscript should appreciate and remember that their publication is going to impact the life a patient, hence same degree of honesty, truth, care and concern should be exercised in the writing as is done while managing a patient. Therefore, the ethical responsibility of authors requires proper execution of all the principles of research and authorship in preparing a manuscript for publication.

## REFERENCES

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