HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

Negotiating Authorship

Sachin H. Jain, MD, MBA

Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Washington, DC, USA.

As a third-year medical student, I was invited to work on a research project with a renowned faculty member at my university, "Professor Jones."

"This is a critically important project that will change the field. It will be a classic paper," he told me.

I was sold.

After a few planning meetings, I set to work, performing a rigorous literature search and traveling to conduct the interviews that the project required. With Professor Jones's guidance, I produced a first draft.

A few months later, Dr. Jones returned the paper redlined with editorial revisions. It now also had a stapled-on title page that appeared mysteriously barren. Professor Jones's name appeared on it—alone.

I flipped through the document and looked for my mention and found this scribbled on the last page: "Acknowledgement: the author would like to recognize the significant contributions of Sachin Jain."

Professor Jones grinned widely. "You should be proud of your work. First rate. Please make the edits and get back to me with it. We're going to submit this to a top journal."

We?

Sitting in his office, surrounded by Professor Jones's plaques, awards, diplomas, and photographs, my face suddenly flushed. Perspiring, I bit my tongue, nodded, and left his office.

I was unsure of what to do. Should I ask Professor Jones about authorship? How would I be perceived if I did? In a short time, I would be applying for residency and needed a letter of recommendation. A supportive letter from Professor Jones might be reward enough for my efforts. Uncertain of my next step, I shared my dilemma with a few classmates and quickly discovered I was not alone in my confusion:

"I don't know how credit is assigned," one friend told me. "I just do what my advisor says."

"My P.I. is generous—I'm first on everything we do."

"I was cheated on my last project. I was promised to be an author and she left me off when we submitted it for publication."

An undergraduate research mentor whom I asked for advice apprised me of a troubling fact: "After-the-fact conversations about authorship sometimes yield happy surprises but, more often, result in hurt feelings and broken relations."

Whatever counsel I was given, I remained uncomfortable and, one afternoon, impulsively fired off an email to Professor Jones asking for a meeting.

I nervously visited with him the next day.

"Professor, uhm, I have something to ask you."

"Sure. What is it?"

"I...wanted to ask you if you might consider making me an author of this paper."

After a moment of awkward silence, he responded, "I'll think about it," and turned his attention deliberately to a disheveled stack of papers that had been on his desk as long as I had known him.

I excused myself and left his office.

As I continued to consider my situation, I began to doubt myself and whether I truly grasped "authorship." I deliberated constantly about my situation.

My claim was based on my assumption that authorship implies an essential contribution and that my contributions were, indeed, essential. Maybe I was wrong? So what if I had written the first draft? Perhaps I was overstating my contributions. But what would he lose by making me his co-author? We should have discussed authorship before we started working together—not after.

In the days following our meeting, I continued to worry incessantly about the fall-out from my request. Eventually, I received a terse email message from Dr. Jones: “Come back to my office to discuss.”

I walked into his office. He avoided eye contact with me, his gaze fixed on one of the plaques on his wall.

“The other day...you asked me about authorship without any warning. It caught me off guard. The *temerity*.”

I learned a new word.

“Sorry, Professor,” I feebly responded. “I just thought...”

“Let me finish. In all my years of working with students, I have never had one *ask me* for authorship. It is something that is given, not asked for. You should learn that. I don’t know why you don’t understand that.”

We glared at each other in silence.

After what seemed like an eternity, the wrinkles in his face relaxed.

“I think you did a good job, though, so here.” He handed me back a new draft of our manuscript he had prepared before our meeting—with my name now following his on the title page.

A spontaneous smile appeared on my face. The temperature in the room seemed to fall instantly.

We spent the remainder of our meeting discussing another project he wanted me to undertake—the terms of authorship of which were not discussed.

Disclaimer: *The names and identities of the protagonists have been changed and masked. This article reflects the opinions and perspectives of the author and does not reflect the views or perspectives of the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services.*

Corresponding Author: Sachin H. Jain, MD, MBA; Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 200 Independence Avenue, SW, Suite 351G.06, Washington, DC 20201, USA (e-mail: shjain@post.harvard.edu).