Authorship Proliferation in Hand Surgery Research: How Many Hand Surgeons Does it Take to Write a Research Article?

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Dear Sir,

Authorship is the currency of academic surgeons [1]. Research publications are the principal metric of academic success, which in turn are linked with scholarly achievement and academic prestige. Reported is a dramatic expansion of authorship in biomedical and medical research [2]. We performed an observational analysis on authorship trends in the six highest impact factors journals publishing hand surgery research over a twenty-year period, including the years 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013. All original hand surgery research articles were assessed from the following journals; *Plastics and Reconstructive Surgery*, *Journal of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery*, *Journal of Hand Surgery -European Volume*, *Journal of Hand Surgery-American Volume*, *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* and *The Bone & Joint Journal*. After reviewing 1221 articles, we identified a constant proliferation in authorship of hand surgery research, over the 20 year period, from 3.05 to 4.33 authors per article ($p=0.021$) (Fig. 1). The proportion of single-author articles also decreased significantly over this period, from 32 % in 1993 to 10.7 % in 2013 ($p=0.038$). This 41.9 % increase in authorship in hand surgery research has been mirrored in other surgery specialities including neurosurgery [3] and orthopaedics [4].

A need to improve research design, use of advanced statistics and the requirement of multicentre participation to increase study populations partially justifies this trend. We believe a rise in honorary authorship, a type of illegitimate

authorship, possibility also explains this substantial proliferation. Honorary authorship, whereby acknowledgment is not a reflection of scientific contribution, distorts the fundamental integrity of scientific publications. The adoption of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) author's criteria [5] and statements of contributorship in manuscripts by journals, have done little to curtail this problem [6]. So what else can be done to limit this undesirable trend? Firstly, we believe, authors must uphold a personal responsibility in order to maintain their ethical probity regarding contributions to research, in line with scientific codes of conduct and ICMJE guidelines. Secondly, changes made by the editors of journals including increased credit for acknowledgements or capping the number of authors per publication, potentially could limit authorship proliferation. Regardless of the manner, action is necessary to deter the detrimental rise of illegitimacies in authorship, which is the key to a healthy academic environment.

Fig. 1 Trend in no. of authors per article over 20 years (1993–2013)

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