

UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

COMISSIÓ DE BIOÈTICA

Communication from the University of Barcelona Bioethics Commission (CBUB) on possible ethical problems in scientific publications (2017)

The CBUB has discussed the possible ethical problems that may arise when publishing the results of an investigation, as well as the recommendations that have been made in this regard by instances such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors ([ICMJE](#)) and the Committee on Publication Ethics ([COPE](#)). In order to reduce the incidence of problems in this type of scientific communications, the CBUB has considered appropriate to issue the Communicate below.

1. Authorship Issues

It should be noted that the list of authors of an article serves to inform the scientific community who has carried out the work and who is responsible for it. Therefore, the inclusion of an individual as an author must be based only on:

- Substantial contributions to the conception, design, collection of data, analysis and/or its interpretation.
- Writing of the article or critical review with significant intellectual contributions.

The contribution, to a greater or lesser degree, to each and every one of these activities is what qualifies a person as an author. The provision of the funds necessary for the research, simple data collection or the general supervision of the research group does not justify the authorship of an article.

Since the Commission is periodically aware of possible ethical problems in student participation in publications, posters, and others, without their work being appropriately recognized, often even in the acknowledgements section, it is unacceptable that the contribution of all those who have collaborated in a publication is ignored. It is also absolutely essential that any other collaboration is reflected, at least, in the note of acknowledgements in the same article.

One particular point is the phenomenon of so-called "authorship gifts". The inclusion of an individual as an author without the above-mentioned requirements being met may be a present to a group head or department (which may sometimes be considered almost rigorous), or to

another researcher, with the more or less declared intention of receiving a similar treatment. In any case, this practice is ethically unacceptable.

It is also necessary to mention the consequences of resorting to individuals who write an article and who are not mentioned. It should be noted that if they are professional editors their name should not be placed among the authors, but their contribution needs to be noted, usually at the end of the article. It is worth emphasizing that it is unacceptable to exclude from the list of authors who meet the above conditions.

As the ICMJE says, all those who are listed as authors should deserve it and all those who do not deserve it should not be listed. However, it is advisable to recognize the various partial contributions in the acknowledgements section that are usually included at the end of the text.

2. Other considerations

Conflicts may often arise over what constitutes a substantial contribution or what is not. In order to avoid them, the question of authorship should be raised from the outset and the discussion should continue in a frank manner as the study develops, particularly if more people are involved. Consultation of the recommendations published by the ICMJE and COPE may be helpful in resolving authorship-related problems and/or in reducing their incidence.

It should also be noted that all authors should be able to review the final version of the article that will be sent for publication, so that they can reject the inclusion of their name, if they disagree with the content of the article. This may be very important in cases where an article is subsequently retracted.