

One in five medical journal articles include honorary and ghost authors

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Just over one in five (21%) of articles published in six leading medical journals in 2008 have evidence of honorary and ghost authorship, finds a study published in the *British Medical Journal* today.

These results demonstrate that inappropriate [authorship](#) remains a problem in high impact biomedical publications, say the authors.

Inappropriate (honorary and ghost) authorship and the resulting lack of [transparency](#) and [accountability](#) have been important concerns for the academic community for decades. Honorary authors are individuals who are named as authors but have not contributed substantially to be able to take responsibility for the work. Ghost authors are individuals who have made substantial contributions to the work but are not named as authors.

In the 1980s, the International Committee of [Medical Journal](#) Editors (ICMJE) developed guidelines for responsible and accountable authorship. These criteria are updated regularly and have been adopted by more than 600 biomedical journals. However, studies have found the prevalence of honorary authors to be as high as 39%, and ghost authors as high as 11% across a range of journals.

So a team of US researchers compared the prevalence of articles with honorary and ghost authors published in six leading general medical journals in 2008 with that reported by authors of articles published in 1996.

A total of 630 authors responded to the survey. The overall prevalence of articles with honorary authorship, ghost authorship, or both was 21%, a decline from 29% in 1996.

They found no change in the prevalence of honorary authors relative to 1996, but found a significant decline in the prevalence of ghost authorship.

The highest prevalence of both types of inappropriate authorship occurred in original [research articles](#), as opposed to editorials and review articles.

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They conclude that "increased efforts by scientific journals, individual authors, and academic institutions are essential to promote responsibility, accountability, and transparency in authorship, and to maintain integrity in scientific publication."

These results suggest that standards need tightening up, say Patricia Baskin and Robert Gross from the journal *Neurology*, in an accompanying editorial.

They point out that "as research becomes more collaborative and complex, the challenges to transparency in authorship and disclosure become greater," and they call for further work "to assess whether greater definition of roles and conflicts of interest substantially change the prevalence of inappropriate authorship."

Provided by British Medical Journal

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