



## Letter to the Editor: Honorary Authorships in Surgical Literature

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In response to the article by JD Luiten and co-authors (WJS, March 2019) [1] reporting their findings on continuing usage of honorary authorship, this letter seeks to highlight the complexity of conducting research in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and to encourage inclusiveness and meaningful recognition of colleagues/co-workers that might appear technically as honorary but reflect essential contributions.

Editors of leading surgical and medical journals encourage submissions from LMICs. Some journals, including *World Journal of Surgery*, require a local collaborator as author, but this can be problematic. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) guidelines are respected and links to their criteria are provided on the U.S. National Library of Medicine website [2]. If researchers believe they must adhere to ICMJE guidelines, they may classify some work by local colleagues as unqualified for authorship.

ICMJE criteria are:

- Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND
- Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND
- Final approval of the version to be published; AND
- Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved [3].

The “ANDs” connecting the criteria create particular difficulties. Also note what is ruled out as deserving authorship—data collecting; providing subjects; giving permission for the research to go forward; acquisition of funding; general supervision of a research group or general administrative support; and writing assistance, technical editing, language editing, proofreading [3].

LMIC institutions require faculty to publish in peer-reviewed journals. Acknowledgement is not adequate compensation for efforts that may involve greater time and energy and have more value than would be understood for research projects in high-income countries (HICs). Anyone who has spent extensive research time in LMICs will know that obtaining permission for a study to go forward may take months of intensive efforts by local colleagues. Retrospective data are not usually electronic; data collection often involves handling stacks of paper records or theatre logbook entries, perhaps incomplete, poorly legible, and sometimes in a local language. Recruiting subjects and obtaining meaningful informed consent for enrolment requires considerable time and long explanations—often in a local tongue. Then add the complexity of collecting prospective research material. Technical editing and proofreading a manuscript from someone for whom English might be their third or fourth language requires medical knowledge as well as proper usage of grammar—perhaps even rewriting—in order to ready the manuscript for peer review.

Recognizing and including all deserving (not token) LMIC research collaborators as authors is imperative. HIC researchers must defuse accusations from international partners that data are collected, analysed, and published with insufficient credit given for the vital roles played by local colleagues—regardless of whether those efforts fit securely in the authorship framework as defined by ICMJE.

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The determinative criterion: was the contribution essential for success—in other words, priceless?

## References

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