Order of Authorship in Medical Education Scholarship: A Survey of Faculty Attitudes and Practices

Purpose: In scholarly collaborations the question of author order inevitably emerges. Author order is used as a proxy for leadership, seniority, collaboration, and productivity and thus may affect tenure and promotion decisions. Participants in medical education researchers come from various academic fields in which guidelines for author order are inconsistent. This study describes considerations commonly applied to author order decisions for medical educators and faculty opinions about how author order decisions are reached.

Method: A web-based questionnaire was distributed to a 15% random sample from 2572 DR-ED listserv subscribers. Respondents rated how often they applied each of 20 criteria in making author order decisions. Questions explored respondents' personal beliefs and attitudes about the significance of author order. Respondents provided demographic information and professional experience.

Results: Seventy-six medical educators (21%) from nine countries participated. Respondents agreed on criteria for being listed as first author (79%) and the first author's responsibility as corresponding author (77%) and for the manuscript's integrity (85%). When considering authors' relative contributions, 49% endorsed being last author as second best after first author while 46% endorsed being second author. Respondents agreed (67%) that journal disclosures of author contributions were useful for promotion committees; often promotion committees see last authorship indicating successful leadership (46%). Respondents endorsed (70%) adding a well-known scholar as author to improve chances of publication, and that alphabetical author listings are unfair (88%). While 50% declined authorship if they did not meet authorship criteria, many (48%) reported co-authorship on a paper that included others who did not meet authorship criteria. Some (31%) reported unethical pressure concerning author order.

Discussion: Medical educators have conflicting interpretations of author order and some report inappropriate practices. The multidisciplinary nature of the medical education community further complicates discussions about author order. Our findings suggest that guidelines for author order targeting medical education researchers are warranted.

Level of Audience: Mid-career
Focus of Presentation: UME, GME, CME
References: None
PRESENTER: Brian Mavis
AUTHORS/INSTITUTIONS: B. Mavis, Office of Medical Education Research and Development, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, UNITED STATES|S.J. Durning, S. Uijtdehaage, Uniformed Services University, Bethesda, Maryland, UNITED STATES|