



Academic nepotism – all that glitters is not gold

DINESH KUMAR. V^{1*}

¹Department of Anatomy, Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research, Puducherry, India

*Corresponding author:

Dinesh Kumar V.

Department of Anatomy, Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research, Puducherry, India

Tel: +91-99-94038701; Email: dinesh.88560@gmail.com

Please cite this paper as:

Kumar DV. Academic nepotism – all that glitters is not gold. J Adv Med Educ Prof. 2018;6(4):186-187.

Received: 11 May 2018 Accepted: 22 May 2018

Dear Editor

With increasing emphasis on publications for faculty recruitment, career advancement and obtaining research grants, the issues related to author kinship and academic nepotism have grown significantly and these probably reflect the inflationary growth rather than the optimal growth warranted due to increasing research complexity. *Allesina S* (1) measured the full magnitude of nepotism in the Italian academia and found that this pervasive problem was a blemish that undercuts the quality of advanced education over there. According to her, this process of showing favouritism towards close relatives incentivize illegal hiring practices and guarantees their career advancement regardless of their merit. Even though the analysis of shared last names cannot be considered a valid tool for measuring the diffusion of nepotism in any organization (2), we cannot deny its sheer existence.

An analysis of 12,772 papers published in PLOS ONE showed that 48% of the listed co-authors did not fulfil the criteria for authorship, as their role was meagre or absent in drafting the manuscript (3). If we extrapolate these data to any settings, we could enunciate that a substantial amount of papers hoist the name of an expert (preferably the kin of primary investigator) belonging to an entirely different specialty or giving an authorship instead of mere acknowledgement. *Prosperi M et al.* (4) analyzed more than 21 million MEDLINE/

PubMed-indexed papers and documented that kin authorship is a big menace for India, Italy and Poland. Measuring nepotism is highly unlikely in India, owing to the facts that Indian women in academia prefer to maintain their maiden names and wide usage of surnames. Number of cases involving their spouses, lovers and domestic partners would largely go underestimated, thereby causing the statistical models to fail.

In the past, the recruitment and promotion mechanisms were tacit, which had measured the educational and research qualities in an informal manner. This, on one hand gave rise to negative connotations regarding nepotism and, on the other hand, led to the formation of “academic dynasties” in Indian medical academia. Since the evolution of “publish or perish” culture, the hiring/promotion process was replaced by a formal, explicit and individually measurable index. The existing scenario can be cross-sectioned by a participant’s comment in the study conducted by *Anderson et al.* (5), “You can fail to do everything else as long as you have lots and lots of papers.” In the process of conferring the aggregate output or research productivity, which is a mere ‘pseudo-halo’, accomplished researchers or clinicians sometimes promulgate their spouses or get involved in reciprocal co-authorship, which is yet another version of academic nepotism. In a latest paper, *Rivera H* (6) proposes a 3 step scheme for validating the genuine collaboration and calls for a focused evaluation of research

productivity.

In summary, I wish to address the least signified and unintended consequence of the present day evaluation/appraisal mechanism whereby a scholar is potentially assessed by the number of publications he/she has. Considering the fact that history of research in global arena had witnessed conjoint efforts from egalitarian couples, blanket recommendations are difficult to be made. Nevertheless, we should not forget the fact that academic nepotism often depresses the health care professionals and adversely affects their morale. I wish to conclude that academic nepotism is yet another ethical dilemma, which every administrator/selection committee member needs to face and at times of making crucial decisions (like hiring for a job) it is the responsibility of them to uphold the legitimate interests of the organization, more than personal affiliations.

Conflict of Interest: None declared.

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