

### Equally credited authors

Dear Editor,

This is with regard to the letter to the editor published in *Journal of Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology (JOMFP)* titled 'Publishing case reports in oral lesions: Tug of war in three directions!!!'<sup>[1]</sup>

At present, publications are absolute prerequisites in academic jobs, e.g., statutory bodies of medical education in India mandate publications by teaching faculty. While it is not sufficient to merely be an author, authorship order is another important factor in determining academic achievement, career advancement and obtaining research funding. Many agencies determine academic merit using a credit system that is based on the number of articles published as the first author. Unfortunately, the National Medical Commission of India and University Grants Commission (UGC) award equal credit to the corresponding author.<sup>[2,3]</sup> The logic behind this is unclear, since the corresponding author is responsible for communicating with the journal during the submission, peer review, approval of the proof, publication and post-publication process,<sup>[4]</sup> while their intellectual contribution towards conducting the research or writing the article may be far inferior to the contributions by the first author.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) recommends that authorship should be based on the following four criteria: '1. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; AND 2. Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND 3. Final approval of the version to be published; AND 4. 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'.<sup>[5]</sup> While these ICMJE recommendations for authorship are mainly for original research articles, they can also be applied to determine the authorship of case reports or review articles. It should be noted that ICMJE does not provide any guidelines regarding the order of authors and leaves this for the authors to decide.

Many journals now demand an authorship contribution form that is signed by all authors and outlines, each author's role. Unless stated otherwise, it is generally

assumed and accepted that the first author made a more significant contribution compared to the other co-authors. Notable exceptions are multicentre, interinstitutional or interdepartmental studies, for instance, where several authors can make equal contributions. This illustrates that the authorship issue is both complex and sensitive.

Particularly in case reports, including those on oral lesions, the authorship and the order of authors remains a problematic issue. Patients visiting a dental institution typically report to the oral medicine and oral diagnosis department first before being referred to other departments, such as oral pathology or oral surgery. Oral pathologists usually attend to patients with a provisional diagnosis from the oral medicine or oral surgery departments. This provisional diagnosis may be confirmed by the oral pathologists after histopathological examination or it may need to be revised, e.g., due to the application of special stains or immunohistochemical stains. The pathology of the patient is managed either by the oral surgeon or by the oral physician and is usually based on the histopathology report. Therefore, it is obvious that all three specialties play an equal role in the diagnosis and patient management.

Hence, a situation of equal contributions may arise when publishing a case report as in some original research articles. In this situation, an equal authorship format can be used, also known as 'equally credited authors (ECA)' or co-first authors (two or more authors worked together on a publication and made equal first-author-level contributions<sup>[6]</sup>). Both the *New England Journal of Medicine* and *Lancet* allowed for ECA as early as 2000.<sup>[7]</sup> In 2012, the *Journal of Gastroenterology* introduced joint first authors in citations (using bold lettering for the last names and initials of all joint first authors) to acknowledge their equal contribution to the published work.<sup>[8]</sup> The *British Medical Journal* requires equal contributions to be included either in the contributors or acknowledgement sections at the end of an article.<sup>[9]</sup> Also, *Nature Portfolio* journals permit co-authors to be specified if contributed equally.<sup>[10]</sup> Giving authors equal credit for original research published in medical journals has increased markedly in the recent past. Hence solving the authorship order/co-first author issue is by no means impossible. However, while ECA serves well to express equal credit in the byline, we are still lacking

an adequate format to express this in in-text citations. Nevertheless, for now, the ECA/co-first authorship formats represent the first step in the right direction and should be incorporated by all journals into their author guidelines until better alternatives have been found.

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### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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