EDITORIAL

Think Carefully, Publish Safely: Co-Authorship and Conflict of Interest Verification in the ASTRO Journals

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Conflicts of interest and authorship status in research are attracting increasing scrutiny, with recent high-profile detections resulting in national media coverage, the disgrace of respected thought leaders, and pledges for major reform from institutions and individuals alike. In the face of mounting evidence that verifications of authorship status and conflicting relationships are frequently incomplete or weakly enforced by academic journals, the Red Journal, Practical Radiation Oncology, and Advances in Radiation Oncology have instituted new processes to encourage the reporting of conflicts of interest, to avoid authorship disputes, and to help protect authors against allegations of misconduct.

Authorship of a manuscript is conditional upon the named individual having participated in a meaningful way in the intellectual design and writing of the study, accepting responsibility for the contents of the manuscript, and confirming that there are no undeclared financial relationships that could have influenced the reporting. It may surprise readers, but we have heard from individuals who have been named as authors who were completely unaware of their authorship until after publication. We wish to identify individuals who are listed as responsible authors on papers without their knowledge and full consent and to remove those authors before publication. Additionally, the editorial team is asking each author to independently verify that any relationship that could be perceived as a conflict of interest has been disclosed. For authors at U.S. institutions, this verification includes checking the well-known, publicly available database Open Payments (https://openpaymentsdata.cms.gov/).

To verify co-authorship and conflict of interest disclosures, authors must click a link they receive in an automated email. This link will take them to the Red Journal’s submission system, where they will be asked to answer 2 simple, clear questions about their potential conflicts of interest.

In the first month of requesting co-author/conflict of interest verifications, more than 1700 Red Journal authors completed the questionnaires. Several authors discovered they were listed on papers they did not co-author, and a few oversights in conflict of interest reporting were discovered. We believe this process has already produced tangibly improved protections for our authors.

Undoubtedly, there are challenges associated with this increased form of author engagement. Most of these challenges are technical in nature. Verification can only happen through clicking the personalized links sent in the co-author...
emails. Open Payments listings are not exhaustive or always verifiably accurate. These listings do not exist for some doctors practicing in the United States, nor for any of those practicing outside the United States. Our staff is committed to working through these barriers and improving systems as the technological means become available.

How can you, as an author, ensure you are following best practices? There are a few key points to bear in mind:

1. If you are a corresponding author, send the final manuscript and title page to all co-authors. If you are a co-author, look for this information and review it carefully.

2. Familiarize yourself with the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, (ICMJE) authorship recommendations (http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html). The ICMJE proposes 4 criteria for authorship: (1) substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; 2) drafting of the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; 3) final approval of the version to be published; and 4) agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work and ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. If you or any of your co-authors do not meet all of these criteria, contact the corresponding author and editorial office.

3. Corresponding authors should check that all disclosures appearing on ICMJE forms also appear on the article’s title page. Co-authors should ensure that their disclosures are appropriately noted on the title page.

4. For U.S. authors, periodically check https://openpaymentsdata.cms.gov/. Keep in mind the information presented there as you complete your disclosure form.

Delays in verifying co-authorship and conflicts of interest for accepted papers will delay publication.

Despite current limitations, our editorial team believes the benefits and protections resulting from verification of authorship and conflicts of interest outweigh the inconveniences, in the interest of maintaining the highest standards of ethics in publication for our journal and for our authors.