



Unjustified Authorship such as Gift Authorship for Your Kids: It Is a Crime, Professor.

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“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.
Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”
- Jewish proverb in Talmud -

Recently, for several months, South Korea faced a big national debate on the appointment and assignment of a Justice Minister. A former law professor in Seoul National University was appointed as the Justice Minister, because he was believed to be the right person to reform the prosecutor systems. The decision was based upon his previous works and talks in social media. However, during the hearing process, many scandals were uncovered, including a gift authorship. Several reporters suspected inconsistencies in his daughter's medical college application, including illegitimate authorship of a medical article and phony internship credentials [1]. In short, after a two-week internship in another medical college, she was listed as the first author of an article published in the *Journal of Pathology and Translational Medicine* (JPTM) in 2009 (doi: 10.4132/KoreanJ-Pathol.2009.43.4.306). The article was later included in her college applications. Her mentor and corresponding author was a pediatrics professor, who later confessed that the first author played an insignificant role in research and writing. The reason for this gift authorship of the first author bylines to a high-school girl is not confirmed. However, the prosecutors found that the son of the medical professor and the daughter of the law professor were high school classmates, and the son had received an internship certificate in Law school, with little effort [2]. This can be referred to as a favor exchange or author exchange program. The indexed article at JPTM was retracted on September 5, 2019 for falsely stating Institutional Review Board approval and the

unjustified authorship of the first author (Fig. 1) [3].

As you may know, scandals about two critical issues are not allowed for Korean; military recruitment and college admission. The competition for medical colleges is extremely fierce in South Korea. Many rich and elite people try to make a good spec (specification list) for their children in order to please the admissions officers. The main reason for this fraud authorship becoming a national scandal is that such unjustified authorships have paved the way for gaining entry into medical or law schools, which means illegal accumulation and succession of money and power in the eyes of ordinary people.

Who is a justified author? You can find clear guidelines for that given by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) [4]. The ICMJE recommends that the authorship 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.

Contributors who meet fewer than all four of the above criteria for authorship should not be listed as authors, but they should be acknowledged. Examples of activities that alone (without other contributions) do not qualify a contributor for authorship are acquisition of funding, general supervision of a research group or general administrative support, and writing assistance, technical editing, language

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Vasc Specialist Int 2019;35(4):181-183 • <https://doi.org/10.5758/vsi.2019.35.4.181>

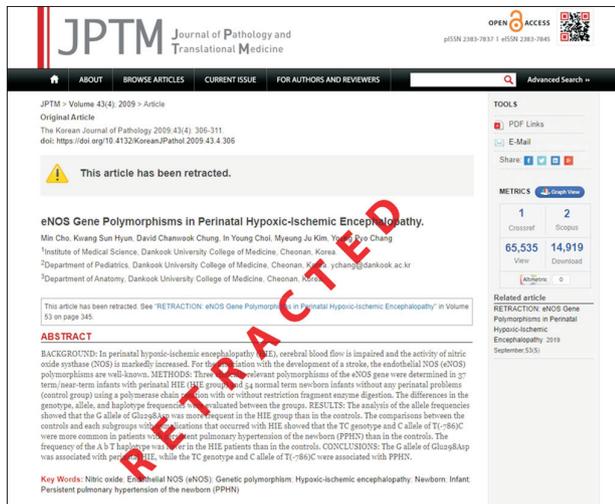


Fig. 1. The article was retracted from the journal.

editing, and proofreading. Those whose contributions do not justify authorship may be acknowledged individually or together as a group under a single heading (e.g., “Clinical Investigators” or “Participating Investigators”), and their contributions should be specified (e.g., “served as scientific advisors,” “critically reviewed the study proposal,” “collected data,” “provided and cared for study patients,” “participated in writing or technical editing of the manuscript”).

Unjustified authorship includes ghost authorship or guest authorship. Ghost authorship occurs when an individual makes a substantial contribution to the research or the writing of the report, but is not listed as an author [5]. Ghost authorship is considered problematic because it may be used to obscure the participation of researchers with conflicts of interest. A ghostwriter may be concealed to obscure an industry sponsoring the research, and for improving the apparent objectivity of an article while maintaining the company’s control over its contents. In other instances, ghost authorship occurs when a mentor publishes his/her student’s academic thesis or doctoral dissertation, without mentioning the name of the student.

Any other unjustified authorship is called “gift authorship,” “guest authorship,” “honorary authorship,” “gratuitous authorship,” “loose authorship,” “courtesy authorship” or other allied terms. It indicates the inclusion of publication bylines of colleagues who have done little or no work in the conceptualization or development of a scientific project [6]. In a recent news article in *Nature*, Zastrow [7] reported that 17 university academics who named high-school- or middle-school-aged children on papers that the children allegedly did not contribute to were accused in South Korea. The practice was probably used to improve the children’s chances of securing a university place, but the problem is

that the misconduct is on the rise ever since it was exposed in late 2017. Unjustified authorship is considered to be research misconduct in South Korea, and can result in harsh penalties, reprimands, a one-year ban from participating in national research activities, and dismissal. Honorary authorship is common in Korea, but it is also reported to be common in academic surgery publications in North America [8]. Survey respondents reported 17.2% to 53.7% of them have been added a courtesy authorship on prior publications.

This scandal has raised many questions to the academic society and medical journal editors. First, how to organize research and writing activities of students from high school or medical college? Their early involvement in research and writing is advisable despite low chances of completing it in reality. Most students cannot meet the authorship criteria, and this should be taken into proper consideration at the university admission competition. The best educational experiences arise when a student is involved in the entire process, from the early inception of a project through to publication [9]. Participating in only a portion of a project diminishes the educational experience considerably and, at some point, renders a student ineligible for authorship. Authorship should not be a reward for any form of participation, although individuals with less participation can and should be mentioned in the “Acknowledgments.” Mentors should ensure that the students have the opportunity to learn from the entire experience.

Second, how to detect and prevent guest authorship during publication process? The best way is to educate authors that unjustified authorship should not be tolerated both ethically and lawfully; this is the main purpose of this editorial. Therefore, as editors of *Vascular Specialist International* (VSI), we decided to reinforce authorship criteria for the journal submission process. We have changed the instructions for authors such that the full name of all authors, “positions,” and their respective affiliations should be included in the title page and author checklist. Positions include student, medical student, resident, fellow, attending surgeon, professor, and others. The definitions of unjustified authorship are newly included, as mentioned above. Because VSI is enlisted in ORCID (Open Researcher and Contributor Identifier), every author is asked to create an ORCID number and disclose the position, affiliation, and previous publications. The ORCID’s vision is a world where all those who participate in research, scholarship, and innovation are uniquely identified and connected to their contributions and affiliations across time, disciplines, and borders. We hope this policy would help prevent unjustified authorship in VSI, and also promote interactions with the global community.

In conclusion, unjustified authorship including ghost

authorship or guest authorship is not acceptable any more. Listing only justified byline authors is an essential part of research integrity. Leaders in academic surgery should never promote violations of intellectual integrity, and then try to create a culture of professional excellence that obeys publication ethics. VSI editors believe that better education and peer reviews will lead to an elimination of this research misconduct.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Seung-Kee Min has been the editor-in-chief of *Vasc Specialist Int* since 2019.

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