

Knowing your rights in medical research and how to blow the whistle?

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When it comes to medical research we have heard of informed consent and study participants' rights. However, there is another aspect of human rights that are violated daily in medical research, both in developing and developed countries. These are the rights of young researchers and students. One can find this problem deep in the roots of institutes which promote its faculty members on basis of research papers. It is not isolated to the developing world but is a global concern.^{1,2}

Staying within our local settings many names can be identified for taking credit of the work that young research assistants and medical students are doing. Such big names influence many ethical review boards in numerous institutes

throughout Pakistan. Publishing their names here would not resolve the issue. However, it is of immense importance to make the young researchers and students aware of their rights as study authors or otherwise.

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) clearly states that those who come up with a novel idea for a research project perform the research and contribute to the article writing are entitled to become authors. Those doing all other tasks related to a specific research project are merely to be acknowledged.³ This double-edged policy is the one which groomed researchers use to keep the learning researchers suppressed and quiet and hesitant to demand an authorship. The younger group is

usually assigned tasks such as literature searching, data collection and data entry. By rules they do not fulfil the authorship criteria. Most senior researchers presume that the juniors are not capable of writing a good article. In reality they are themselves trying to hide their own shortcomings. Most of the seniors, in their medical school days, were not adequately trained in medical research. The changing world expects them to deliver good quality research and clinical practices.⁴ Most of the articles they do submit for publication come back with numerous comments. They themselves are learning by trial and error. As they have groomed from their infantile personality, their way to handle remorse is different.⁵ Such individuals have the presence of the dark triad in their personalities with lack of empathy for the younger researchers. They do not let the world know about their insecurities and shortcomings.⁶ However, only those who are keen to teach medical research to the future generation take the time to ask if the young researcher would like to contribute as an author.

The opposite edge of the same policy works for the interests of young laureates. Many of the students are now formally trained and take interest in learning how to conduct good quality studies and write medical articles.⁷ Most have well-preserved brain power to think out of the box and the desire to explore new ideas. Unfortunately, most of them fall into the wrong hands and their own study question or idea is taken away from them, polished up and published without their involvement and knowledge.

As a consequence the young researchers loose interest and confidence in the senior faculty. To avoid this situation, some suggestions are proposed for the young researchers:

- ◆ Empower yourself by reading and understanding the ICMJE guidelines.³
- ◆ Take formal training in medical writing and share your skills with your research team.
- ◆ Practice writing for non-indexed journals and medical newspapers.
- ◆ Clearly identify your role in the research project at the start of your association with senior researchers. If you can contribute as an author, ask them at the start to give you a chance.
- ◆ Before writing the project's first draft, have a meeting with the whole team. Ask them what they think needs to be mentioned in the protocol or article.
- ◆ Ask the team to identify the journal in which they are aiming to get the article published. Thoroughly read the 'instructions to authors' and a few articles from that journal as examples.
- ◆ Follow international reporting guidelines such as

STROBE statement.⁸

- ◆ Read and RE-read the first draft before submitting to your team.
- ◆ Check for grammatical improvements.
- ◆ Always, correspond with the entire team through email. Let the whole team be familiar with the exact draft and its quality that you have written. The middle man in the team would make changes in the draft and the main supervising author assumes that the youngest in the team is at fault.
- ◆ Let the team read and give comments on the draft. Discuss each comment with them. This is your learning as a young researcher. You should not repeat the same mistake again in your next research project.

Subsequently, the question arises, that how can such unethical incidences be stopped. This is in particular for the students and young researchers. What could be the remedy for the culprit who misuses young minds and their energy; besides exploiting their weakness? There is no simple answer to it. There are institutional Ethical Review Committees, journal editors groups such as Pakistan Association of Medical Editors, World Association of Medical Editors that can be asked for help.^{9,10} Visiting the head of the department might be helpful. However, it is reporting against the senior involved which can have dire consequences. If the matter is brought to the knowledge of the concerned institute's Director of Research and Dean, it is hushed up as the institutes' reputation gets involved. You can write to Higher Educational Commission directly.¹¹ However, the timing of response and the actual response can be questionable. Role of the above mentioned groups and other bodies such as Pakistan Medical Research Council and National Bioethics Committee Pakistan are not clear at the moment.^{12,13} One needs to be extra cautious of how to handle such matters. You do not want to be fired and be institutionally black listed, if you are a research assistant; or to be given low grades, if you are medical students. Best is to check the senior researcher's reputation before even visiting them for a research project. Those who misuse others stand out in their institutes and are well known.

It is the young researchers' choice first to know and then claim for their rights. Otherwise, they will continue to be exploited. Those who truly want to improve medical research should blow the whistle on such unethical researchers. They are ruining the future of research.

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