What to do if you suspect ghost, guest or gift authorship

(see also flowcharts on Changes in authorship, as such requests may indicate the presence of a ghost or gift author)

Review acknowledgement section and authorship declaration (if supplied)

and/or*

Send copy of journal’s authorship policy** to corresponding author and request statement that all qualify and no authors have been omitted (if not obtained previously)

and/or*

Request information (or further details) of individuals’ contributions***

Authorship role missing (e.g. contributor list does not include anybody who analysed data or prepared first draft)

“Ghost” identified

Suggest missing author should be added to list

Listed author does not meet authorship criteria

“Guest” or “gift” author identified

Suggest guest/gift author(s) should be removed/moved to Acknowledgements section

Satisfactory explanation of author list

Doubts remain/need more information

Try to contact authors (Google names for contacts) and ask about their role, whether any authors have been omitted, and whether they have any concerns about authorship

Proceed with review/publication

Get agreement for authorship change (in writing) from all authors. Letter should also clearly state the journal’s authorship policy and/or refer to published criteria (e.g. ICMJE) and may express concern/disappointment that these were not followed. For senior authors consider copying this letter to their head of department/person responsible for research governance

Review your journal’s instructions to contributors and submission forms to ensure clear guidance and prevent future problem

* Note
Initial action will depend on journal’s normal method of collecting author/contributor info

** Note
Including clear guidance/criteria for authorship in journal instructions makes it easier to handle such issues

*** Note
Marusic et al. have shown that the method of collecting such data (e.g. free text or check boxes) can influence the response.

Letting authors describe their own contributions probably results in the most truthful and informative answers.

Reference

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