

## Column: Tips on Research and Publication

### WRITING 'ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS' IN MANUSCRIPTS: MORE THAN GRATITUDE!

Samir Kumar Praharaj<sup>1\*</sup>, Shahul Ameen<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Professor & Head, Department of Psychiatry, Kasturba Medical College, Manipal, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, Karnataka.

<sup>2</sup>Consultant Psychiatrist, St. Thomas Hospital, Changanacherry, Kerala

\*Corresponding address: Professor & Head, Department of Psychiatry, Kasturba Medical College, Manipal, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, Karnataka, India, PIN-576104.

E-mail: samirpsyche@yahoo.co.in

#### Abstract

In scientific manuscripts, authorship is based on substantial contributions to the research; all other contributions are acknowledged. Acknowledgements may be for intellectual inputs, financial or technical support, sharing data or other materials, and help in manuscript writing. Any non-scientific contribution need not be acknowledged. The acknowledgement should be a simple statement without embellishments and specific regarding the contributions. Writing appropriate acknowledgements in manuscripts gives due credit to the contributors.

**Keywords:** Acknowledgement, contributions, authorship, credit

International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has provided specific criteria about who can be allowed authorship in a manuscript: the listed authors should have made substantial contributions to the design and conduct of the research and writing of the manuscript. Besides, many journals ask for an 'author contributions' section detailing their specific contributions in design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing, thus ensuring transparency. However, there would be some persons who fall short of the ICMJE criteria but have contributed technically or intellectually to the scientific content of the manuscript. The "acknowledgements" section (though not a mandatory one) is the place where such persons (or institutions) can be given credit.

The section usually appears at the end of the manuscript, just before the references. Some journals require this information to be submitted in the Title Page, not the main document or the manuscript file, to maintain anonymity during peer review, as the names of individuals or institutions could unmask the authors' identity.

#### Who should be acknowledged?

Acknowledge 1) research contributions by persons other than the authors, including those who gave scientific guidance, participated in discussions, and shared their unpublished research work, including mentors, peers, and assistants, and 2) persons who provided technical help or equipment, including assistants, students, or laboratory

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technicians who helped in collecting data. The contributions should be less than that required to qualify as an author but still substantial that cannot be overlooked.

Cronin et al. (1992) have suggested a classification of acknowledgments based on the types of contribution:

(1) *Conceptual and cognitive*: includes any contribution to the planning of the study and any other intellectual contribution as part of peer discussions.

(2) *Financial support*: any funding source for the research, direct (e.g., laboratory tests or reimbursements for participants) or indirect (e.g., equipment purchased for another study used in the current research), if not included in the funding source section.

(3) *Access to data and materials*: data from previous research, either from a repository (e.g., secondary data analysis from big data), individual researcher (e.g., data synthesis of previous studies), or unpublished.

(4) *Technical assistance*: conduct of laboratory tests or recordings, collecting data from participants, or analysis of data (e.g., statistical analysis, analysis of neuroimaging data).

(5) *Manuscript preparation*: help in writing part of manuscripts.

In the real world, it is not unusual to see so many authors in a manuscript, with the inclusions being based on several other, even unethical, factors. Ideally, those who have made any minor contribution to the manuscript should only be acknowledged and thanked for their contributions. And the names of those who do not meet even this criterion should not be mentioned in the manuscript at all.

### **Who should not be acknowledged?**

Do not acknowledge anyone who made non-scientific contributions, such as typists, editorial assistants, photographers or

graphical artists who helped prepare the images (medical illustrators may be an exception); friends, family and other well-wishers who provided encouragement and moral support during the research; grant coordinators and office personnel who helped in the purchase and procurement of equipment, etc. Also, exclude those who are merely 'doing their job' and do not make any specific technical or intellectual contribution.

Any person who is an author should not be acknowledged. This may happen in multisite papers when the primary author acknowledges the primary investigator from another centre and at the same time also includes them as co-authors. Similarly, authors need not thank regular support staff in their or their collaborator's offices for their routine work.

It is unnecessary to thank the participants for participating in the research. Also, do not thank the peer reviewers (usually, they will be anonymous) or editors for their suggestions and assistance. Obviously, do not thank any person who is unrelated to the research. There are instances of an author thanking an individual, Mr. X, along with a marriage proposal ("...for the patience, care and support from Mr. X over the past years. Will you marry me?") in a published paper!

### **Could acknowledgments affect manuscript decisions?**

Acknowledging a well-known person in the field may affect the decision of the reviewer or the editor in favour of acceptance, not just based on scientific merit but also due to the influence of the stature of the person. It is imperative that unless the person has contributed intellectually (e.g., by reading the manuscript and providing ideas that are discussed in the paper), the authors need not acknowledge them. Also, if the suggestions have not been actually incorporated or if the person does not agree to all the content of the manuscript, it may be inappropriate to acknowledge them. It would be a good practice

to get written approval from the acknowledged persons, and many journals insist on the same.

### **What should the acknowledgment include?**

#### *Simple statement*

The acknowledgment should be a simple statement of thanks and not a long testimonial! For example, "The authors are thankful to Mr. X for his tireless endeavour in the collection of blood samples and recording clinical data without which this study would have been impossible to complete" should be better written as "The authors thank Mr. X for his help in the collection of blood samples and recording clinical data." Also, instead of "We would like to thank..." as is a common practice, simply write, "We thank..."

#### *Name only*

Acknowledge by name only. Do not include titles, honours, positions, awards, or other details. For example, "Dr. Sunil Chopra, MD (gold medallist from NIMHANS, Bangalore, currently working as Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist in Maudsley Hospital, London, and an Editorial Board member of numerous high-impact journals) helped finalize the research hypotheses" can be rather written as "Dr. Sunil Chopra, MD, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Maudsley Hospital, London, helped finalize the research hypotheses."

#### *Be specific*

Acknowledgments should be very specific and identify the contributions of each person. For example, "Authors acknowledge Dr. X for helping in clinical assessments and Drs. Y and Z for statistical analysis," or "Authors acknowledge the Science and Engineering Research Board, Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, for funding

the study (File No. XXX)."

### **How long and detailed should the section be?**

It is not uncommon to see long acknowledgment sections in published manuscripts. Some journals have published acknowledgments that run more than a page! This could be acceptable in multisite, collaborative studies involving several institutions. However, it is neither necessary nor practical to include names, degrees, and affiliations of all individuals remotely associated with the work.

### **Final comments**

Acknowledgments bring out the otherwise invisible contributions to research. Hence the authors should write the section with seriousness and ensure accuracy. It is unethical to acknowledge without appropriate contributions to scientific aspects of research, more so without the knowledge and written consent of the concerned persons. Mention this in the cover letter to the editor. Acknowledgment in research articles is a credit that deserves to appear in the resume too, which may be invaluable for young researchers during their early careers!

### **Suggested readings**

1. Cronin B, McKenzie G, Stiffler M. Patterns of acknowledgement. *J Doc* 1992;48:107-22.
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3. Kabat EA. Acknowledgments in scientific papers. *Science* 1958;128:1461-2.
4. Liesegang TJ, Bartley GB. Footnotes, acknowledgments, and authorship: toward greater responsibility, accountability, and transparency. *Ophthalmology* 2014;121:2297-8.