The Order of Authorship: Who's on First?

The authorship of medical articles is under scrutiny as never before. Fraudulent work appears, then may emerge citation in the literature long after retraction. In academia, most appointments and promotion committees tally the number of publications of a candidate, a recent proposal for some limit withstanding. Names of prominent, senior scientists appear in bylines, so-called honorary authorship, as a means of impressing editors and reviewers and to acknowledge moral financial support. Perhaps the responsibilities of authorship come into clear focus when investigators decide on the order in which names will be listed on their manuscript. The designation of first author and the sequence of listing are important in several reasons. Some landmark studies are known by the name of their first author, lending support to the impression that, being listed first, he or she played a pivotal role in performing the work and writing the article. By tradition, many reserve the position of last author for the senior member of the research team or the department or division director, but this encourages honorary authorship, denoted by "coded credits," and a so-called honorary authorship, as a means of assigning weight to various aspects of the investigator's contributions. The first author is that person who contributed most to the work, including writing of the manuscript (an author is a person who writes). The sequence of author listing is determined by the relative contributions to the work.

Decisions about authors and the order in which their names will appear should be made as early as possible, even at the outset, although relative contributions may need to be reassessed later by group consensus.

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We welcome comments responding to these ideas.

Don Riesenberg, MD
George D. Lundberg, MD

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