

Too many cooks...?

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Published online: 30 January 2017
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The process of reviewing and editing papers submitted to journals such as European Archives of Paediatric Dentistry (EAPD), has over the years led to an increasing sense of what is good and what is poor. In recent years it has become only too apparent that the standard of presentations has declined. This has been driven in part by the need to publish, for academic or professional promotion. In decades past a young researcher needed papers published in peer-reviewed journals but the number of available journals was limited, particularly in dentistry. Standards were very high and rejections common. The great expansion of dentistry worldwide has meant not only great competition for academic preferment but also the need for longer lists of publications. The result has been several changes in the submission of papers for consideration by journals. There are four main areas of serious concern.

Multiple authors The number of authors listed on many submitted papers raises doubts that they are all appropriate and justified. In recent years this problem has grown to worrying proportions in a significant percentage of submitted papers, not just to EAPD but to all paediatric dentistry journals. The number of authors listed on papers reviewed by the editorial board of EAPD has grown from one, two or perhaps three to excessive numbers as high as nine or even 12. Reviewing such papers it is often readily apparent that they are simple clinical research studies with limited numbers of subjects. A report of a study submitted

recently with less than 100 children for a single examination recording oral hygiene listed nine authors. Nine researchers could not possibly have made a significant contribution to such a small study.

There is a move to add many members of staff to a study, perhaps to artificially enhance the curriculum vitae of those subsidiary members. The guideline over the past century has always been that only the main researchers are listed as authors. Other members of staff or associates who helped in a minor way or gave advice should be thanked in the acknowledgements at the end of the paper.

Case reports In these papers the situation is even worse, as there are now often far more authors than could possibly have contributed much to the dental care of the subject. A case report more often than not concerns one single child/patient. Sometimes there is a need in a complicated case for advice from other clinicians or basic scientists; paediatricians, microbiologists or dental radiologists, for example, might be asked to provide advice or specialist knowledge. However in those instances a second, or at most a third, author could be justified. Only those actively involved in the diagnosis and treatment should be listed as authors. All others should be thanked in an acknowledgement.

Salami slicing This, another area of great concern, occurs where a study has investigated a number of indices. These might include dental caries, periodontal disease, plaque levels, orthodontic malocclusions and molar-incisor hypomineralisation. This comprises one piece of research, yet the data are broken up into segments and published separately. Again, multiple authors are often involved as if each senior author carried out a separate study. Publishing such papers in different journals results in either deliberately or unconsciously masking the slicing up of the study.

In the worst cases the same senior first author appears on all of these papers, presumably to enhance his/her

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publication list. Such a case was identified several years ago by EAPD editorial staff in which eight papers had been ‘sliced’ out of one single study. When this occurs it is difficult for readers to be able to assess all the inter-related data of the whole study without an extensive search of the dental literature.

Plagiarism This is a recent but, regrettably, growing problem. Here, the paper of a study that has been previously published is copied, minor changes are made, and the modified manuscript is then submitted by new authors as if it were their study. Fortunately, computer software has been developed that identifies such unprofessional behaviour. However diligence is needed by editorial staff to identify the perpetrators, and that simply increases the workload of an already busy editor and his/her team of reviewers.

What is to be done? A strong and emphatic message needs to be widely distributed, through publishing guidelines and presentations at conferences, national paediatric dental societies and scientific meetings, that these practices

are completely unacceptable. Modern journal management systems dealing with submitted papers are largely electronic; therefore, it is often a reviewer who first sees a paper. The merit of multiple authors should be assessed as part of any review process by every reviewer. This is easily accomplished by simply looking at the scope and extent of the study and assessing just how many authors could possibly be justified. The written review then should include a statement that the number of authors listed is unjustified and should be reduced. Journals also need to say in their guidelines for authors that the maximum number of authors should usually be no more than five; any more than that should be justified in detail. The decision of an Editor-in-Chief will always be final in deciding how many authors are acceptable. All new manuscripts submitted in 2017 to EAPD will be carefully assessed by the editorial team for the number of authors. All submissions with more than five co-authors will be rejected unless there is clear justification for additional authors.