

Authorship, ethics prove tricky

SARAH RUSSELL THE AUSTRALIAN JUNE 26, 2013 12:00AM

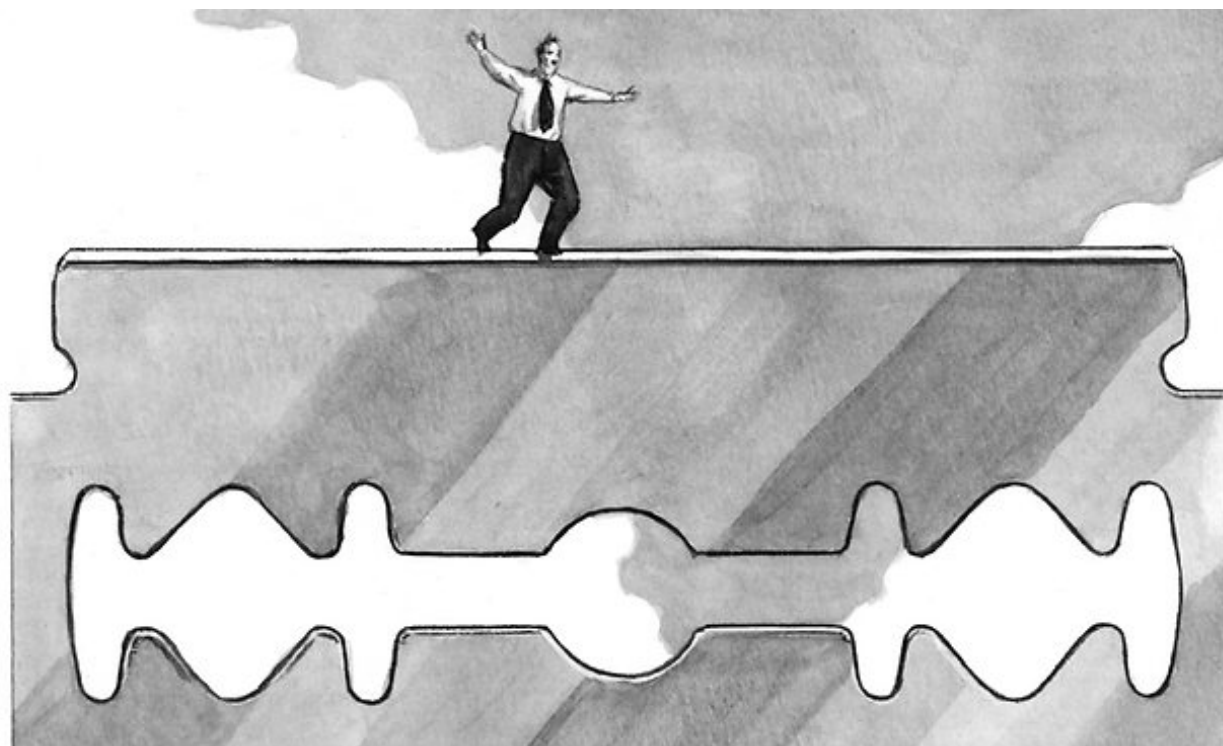


Illustration: Paul Newman Source: The Australian

THE culture of publish or perish is having a negative effect on research ethics as it becomes increasingly common for academics to put their names on articles despite not having made a significant intellectual contribution.

It seems senior academics expect to be named on articles, irrespective of their input. This became glaringly obvious recently when a project manager, a relatively junior academic, asked senior colleagues to indicate their contribution to a research project. Three professors put up their hands to co-author an article, though not one indicated that they had made any contribution to it.

Of course, such behaviour contravenes the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. The code guides researchers in responsible practices and promotes integrity. It assists universities to develop their own codes of conduct. It also helps them to investigate allegations of misconduct by providing a comprehensive framework of acceptable academic standards.

According to authorship guidelines, researchers qualify as authors if they: have been involved in the conception and design of the research; the acquisition of research data where it has required significant intellectual judgment; and analysis and interpretation of research data.

A fourth criterion for an author to be legitimate is to critically change or substantively advance the interpretation of the data. This contribution requires doing more than undertaking tasks related to the publication of an article. It requires a genuine intellectual contribution. It is well known that guidelines in themselves do not protect against misconduct. It is one thing to write clear guidelines on ethical research conduct, it is another to ensure that researchers read, understand and comply with these guidelines.

Universities provide limited infrastructure to support research ethics codes including the absence of effective education in good research conduct. Given that many Australian academics do not receive any formal training in research ethics, it is not surprising that some conduct their work in a manner that does not comply with current standards.

At some universities, researchers are merely required to tick a box on an ethics application to say that they have read the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. Although every researcher who submits an ethics application ticks this box, it is widely known the statement more often than not goes unread. And that's not including those who freely admit they have never heard of the code.

The current approach to training academics in research ethics relies heavily on a system of apprenticeship and mentoring and assumes that junior researchers will learn good practice through osmosis. It assumes that academics should intuitively know how they should behave and when their research actions could have moral implications. This informal approach is in contrast to the American system that recognises the importance of compulsory training. Academics cannot get a grant from the National Institute of Health unless they have done training in research ethics. Here, academics applying to do research are merely required to sign a form on which they have ticked a box.

It is also worth noting that some Australian universities make training in animal research ethics compulsory while they have no corresponding requirement for human research. If academics don't receive relevant training in responsible research conduct and the requirements of the key national documents, how can they comply?

Although education is not a magic bullet, research ethics education may prevent some cases of misconduct. It may remind academics that authorship of an article requires them to do more than a spell check. Authorship should indicate a genuine intellectual contribution.

Sarah Russell is the principal researcher at Research Matters in Melbourne.