

## Case study 3

Two research assistants in a medical school need some advice. They have been junior members of a research team in the school for almost two years, working on a fixed term contract that expires in a few months. The research team in question is led by a professor in the same school and has been working on a single project. The project has recently been written up and is about to be published.

The research assistants tell you that they have carried out a variety of duties on the project, including providing technical assistance, doing literature searches, helping gather and organise primary data, preparing data for publication and supporting various networks and events.

Neither research assistant expected to be listed as an author in the published paper but both thought that their contribution to the project would be acknowledged in the article. However, the professor leading the research team has recently told them that they will not be listed in the paper's acknowledgments section. The research assistants tell you that they are confused and upset by this.

According to them, they challenged the professor's decision but were told, 'research assistants are employed to work on research projects. We don't list people in acknowledgements sections for simply doing what they are employed to do.'

The researchers ask for your views on whether the professor's decision was correct. They stress that they are **not** seeking to be listed as authors on the paper but would like their contribution to the research to be acknowledged.

- **What should be done in response to the concerns?**
- **If what the research assistants say is true, do you agree with the professor's decision and the reason for it?**
- **Are there any other issues to consider?**

## Case study 3 – discussion points

- **What should be done in response to the concerns?** The university would need to take action to look into the research assistants' concerns and they should be encouraged to report the matter to the relevant person in the institution.

The university might initiate an informal process or examine the matter formally under the university's research misconduct procedure. Any enquiry should be fair, thorough and objective, and conducted in a timely and transparent manner. Gathering evidence of what contribution the research assistants and the other members of the team made to the project will be crucial. Guidance on publication practices from the university and the relevant journal would also be relevant – are those standards being met?

- **What about the professor's decision?** There are no universal standards for authorship: norms vary between disciplines. In health and biomedicine, various bodies – such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) - have set out criteria for authorship and these have been adopted by many medical journals.

ICMJE guidelines state that contributors to a research project who do **not** fulfil criteria for authorship '...should not be listed as authors, but they should be acknowledged.'

This is not dependent on whether they were 'employed to work on research projects' or not, and applies to a research assistant as much as to a professor. Indeed, a professor is normally employed to conduct research, weakening the argument of the professor in question...

- **Are there any other issues to consider?**
  - Would the research assistants' contribution be acknowledged differently – or at all – in another discipline?
  - This dispute may have arisen because of ignorance of good practice in authorship and of the 'grey areas' which can arise. The school may wish to conduct awareness-raising activities and training on these issues. How could the school make the issues of authorship interesting and relevant to its researchers? Would different approaches be needed for students and early career researchers, and for more senior staff? If so, what approaches could be used?
  - How might this situation impact on the working relationships of the research team? Assuming the same team was going to continue with future projects, what could be done to help ensure the involved parties work together? Or should the issue be left up to the individuals involved?

Please note that this case study is fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, organisations or events is coincidental.

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