

What's in a name? The problem of authors' names in research articles

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When the editors of *Biochemia Medica* asked me to write a viewpoint on using a single name in authors' by-line to a journal article, recently discussed on the Listserve of the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) (1), I recalled two of my past experiences with names in research publishing.

One is related to my own name and happened in 2002, when a psychiatrist from Slovenia, late Prof. Andrej Marušič, submitted a paper (2) to the *Croatian Medical Journal*, which I edited at that time. Our introduction was along the lines "So you are the other "Marusic A" that gets in the list of my papers on PubMed!" Indeed, I have always had troubles sorting out my articles from Andrej's (and another Marusic A, a biochemist), especially because I also authored some psychiatry papers published during the 1991-1995 war against Croatia (and some close to biochemistry, too). Each time I need to update my bibliography or calculate my h-index, I have to go carefully over all publications retrieved with my surname and initial, and sort out my publications from those of other Marusic As.

The second time I had to deal with authors' names was when my co-authors and I studied the research output published in local journals from the countries in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean region (3). We had problems in finding articles from our study sample by using authors' names because of differences in transcription and indexing of Arabic names in bibliographical databases. It seemed that the usual practice to index authors by

surname(s) and first name(s) initials was a serious problem for complex Arabic names because the logic behind them is often very different from that for most western names. This is true not only for Arabic (4), but also Chinese (5) and even Spanish (6) names.

According to the information on MEDLINE indexing processes, indexers pay special attention to indexing names, including full authors' names instead of "last name – initials" format (7). MEDLINE also recognizes that some authors may have only a surname, which is then indexed in that field (Last-Name data element) (7). Listing only first names, as discussed in the WAME Listserve case (1), seems not to be an option in MEDLINE.

The problems with indexing authors' names do not stop there. There are cases where author's names were used for purposes other than giving actual research credit. There is a famous story of Polly Matzinger, immunologist from the National Institutes of Health in the USA, and her Afghan hound Galadriel Mirkwood, who co-authored her paper published in the *Journal of Experimental Medicine* in 1978 (8). The rumour has it that she was blacklisted by the journal's editor after the identity of the second author was disclosed, and the ban was lifted only after the editor's death. Even older story is from physics, in which an American physicist, George Gamow, thought it would be amusing to add another name to the paper by himself and his then PhD student Ralph Alpher. By adding his friend, another eminent physicist, Hans

Bethe, to the article, the by-line (Alpher, Bethe, Gamow) (9) turned into a play on the first three Greek letters α , β , and γ . I am sure that the PhD student was not thrilled with this game, as I am sure that the editor of the *Journal of Experimental Medicine* was not happy about the misuse of authorship, one of the most important elements of academic and scholarly life.

What is the solution? I am not sure editors should go into fights with authors about their personal wishes for their name(s) presentation in an article by-line. They should embrace the solution already at hand – author identifier. For example, since 2013, MEDLINE has the option of adding unique author identifiers to the indexed article, such as Open Researcher and Contributor ID (ORCID), International Standard Name Identifier (ISNI), or a name from Virtual International Authority File (VIAF) (10). For biomedicine, ORCID seems to be

the most common solution, and several editors have already implemented ORCID in their journals (11), and some publishers have already integrated ORCID into their publishing and indexing systems (12).

It will take some time and effort for all stakeholders – authors, journals, publishers and indexing databases – to sort out how to link ORCID to all past publications. But the future is here, and incentives from research and academic institutions and research funding would be important for the full success in solving the current riddle of names in research publishing.

After all, the value of the research we do is valued only in relation to the names we have. So it seems appropriate to end this essay with the quote on names: “*Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus*” (13).

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