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When in Rome: Conventions in Assignment of Authorship

Year

1998

Description

This case raises questions about how to interpret international standards of authorship, collaboration and credit in a local setting.

Body

Charles, a Ph.D. student at Bucket University, needed to gain expertise in certain techniques of biomolecular synthesis in order to complete his dissertation. Since no one at his home institution could provide instruction in this area, Charles contacted a leading researcher at another school, Professor Williams, and arranged an internship conducting collaborative research at Williams' lab in Wonkaland. Wonkaland is a small but wealthy with cultural traditions that highly prize group harmony and mutual interdependence and de-emphasize individuality. Charles was eager not only to learn about the research methods and complexities of this area, but also to develop connections and establish a relationship with this noteworthy figure.

From the first day Charles arrived at Williams' lab, he had been impressed. He had been given a warm reception by the other members of the lab -- Augustus, Verruca, Mike, Violet and Umpa -- and they seemed genuinely interested in his work. During weekly lab meetings that lasted well into the night, the researchers would discuss their work and describe problems that had arisen, and then the various members of the lab would offer suggestions. Some of the suggestions were helpful, and some

were not, but Charles felt he had learned a lot from these sessions.

Charles was quite pleased with the progress of the research. He and Williams had made some major breakthroughs and were on the verge of submitting their first paper on the subject to a medical journal for review. He had given a draft of the paper to Williams, who was to review it over the weekend and make changes and comments. When Charles arrived in the lab Monday morning, he found the paper on his desk with the names of Augustus, Verruca, Mike, Violet and Umpa added to the list of authors. Surprised, Charles approached Williams in his office: "Dr. Williams, I don't understand why these names were added to the paper," Charles began, "when it was you and I who did all the work."

Williams looked at him, puzzled, "How can you say that? During the weeks we have been conducting our research, we benefited greatly from the input of the other lab members. Naturally, I have circulated copies of the paper to each person for comment and approval. We will be discussing the paper at this week's group meeting."

Seeing Charles' astonishment, Williams continued, "Of course, Augustus is working on a draft of a paper about his research project. Since you have contributed to his project, you'll have an opportunity to review that paper, and it will include your name when it goes out."

The journal to which Williams and Charles intend to submit the paper requires contributors to conform to the "Uniform Requirements of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors" (the Vancouver Convention). For authorship, the Convention requires "substantial contributions to 1) conception and design, or analysis and interpretation of data; and to 2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and on 3) final approval of the version to be published."

Charles decides to argue that the level of participation of the other researchers is not enough to qualify for authorship under these criteria. Williams insists that the contributions made by the other researchers are enough to satisfy the criteria. Moreover, Williams replies, these standards are based upon distinctly Western notions of a scientist as an independent entity. He continues, "Our culture sees the scientist as interdependent within a larger group. Those around the scientist contribute in valuable ways and without them he or she could not function. We

believe it is more appropriate to recognize this reality."

Discussion Questions

1. What ethical issues are raised by the authorship arrangement? Should Charles consent?
2. How substantial must a contribution be to satisfy the uniform requirements? Do the contributions made by the others in Williams' lab entitle them to an authorship credit?
3. How might Western cultural norms and values have influenced the formulation of the uniform requirements?

Notes

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