



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

The Deceased Author

Author(s)

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Description

A scenario that covers ethical issues that arise when an author of a paper is deceased.

Body

A recent publication in an established biomedical journal, contributed by multiple authors from a respected university, lists one of the authors as Dr. Mortis, who has been dead for the past four years. This group of authors has also published 13 other publications in the time since Dr. Mortis' death. As far as you can tell, the manuscripts published in the past 2 years had not been written or submitted in their final form prior to Dr. Mortis' death.

Regarding the publication in question, the biomedical journal has a stipulation regarding requirements for authors. Its "Verification of Authorship and Copyright" states:

"Authors are responsible for ensuring the integrity and quality of their reported research. Prior to publication all authors are required to attest to this by signing a letter of submission. No manuscript will be published without this consent."

Assume that during Dr. Mortis' lifetime he was a senior investigator, not active in the lab, but was involved intellectually in the work being done in the lab. He worked on designing experiments, reviewing experimental data, and writing manuscripts and grants that supported the research.

- Does the deceased author meet the qualifications of "earned authorship," as defined in established sources, e.g. the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors ["Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals"](#)?
- If so, by what criteria? If not, why not?
- Would your answers to the previous two questions be different if it was stipulated in a footnote that Dr. Mortis was deceased? If so, for how long following a person's death is it appropriate to list them in the byline as an author (as opposed to in the Acknowledgement section or a footnote)?
- Are there additional circumstances or conditions possible that would alter your initial response?
- Given the time gap between the death of Dr. Mortis and the publication of the manuscript, does failure to comply with the "Verification of Authorship and Copyright" provision raise questions concerning the appropriateness of including Dr. Mortis as a bona fide coauthor?
- If you decide that Dr. Mortis does not meet the accepted criteria for earned authorship, what action do you think should be taken?

You decide to contact the editors of the biomedical journal to address the situation. You receive the following letter in response:

"We received your letter regarding the gratuitous authorship of Dr. Mortis. Such a situation has never before arisen in the history of this journal. We understand your concern and have no reason to suspect that the living authors were being less than honest. Three to four years seems a bit excessive for the completion of these experiments, however it is quite possible he was alive and played an important role in the completion of said experiments. Given the apparent lack of self-interest for the authors, we have no reason to believe otherwise.

It is true that Dr. Mortis could not have reviewed the final data or manuscript, let alone signed the verification of authorship and copyright. However, conception and planning of the work is more than adequate reason for authorship. We recommend noting on a footnote that Dr. Mortis is dead.

In sum, we feel that there is no reason to assume that Dr. Mortis was not involved in this work. The only definitive error involves the failure to notify us and the reader that Dr. Mortis was dead at the time that the final data was amassed and the paper written. Unless there is proof of a more serious ethical transgression, we do not feel that strong action is required.

Sincerely,

Editors-in-Chief"

- Are you satisfied with the editors' response?
- Is there any further action you would take?

Notes

Caroline Whitbeck introduced methods and modules for discussing numerous issues in responsible conduct of research at a Sigma Xi Forum in 2000. Partial funding for the development of this material came from an NIH grant.

You can find the entire sequence on the OEC at [Scenarios for Ethics Modules in the Responsible Conduct of Research](#). Some information in these historical modules may be out-of-date; for instance, there may be a new edition of the professional society's code that is referred to in an item. If you have suggestions for updates, please contact the OEC.

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Discipline(s)

Life and Environmental Sciences
Research Ethics

Publisher

