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## Judge the Article, Not the Author

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A couple of months ago, the members of the *World Association of Medical Editors* have had a lively discussion on whether a student can be the author of an original article. All the respondents agreed that as long as a person fulfills the authorship criteria and conducts the research in a universally acceptable way, no matter what his or her stance is, there is no objection to name him or her as the author of an article. To support this claim, one even gave a reference to an article published in *JAMA* one of the authors of which was then an 11-year-old child (1). That discussion turned a wheel in my mind to examine this situation in a short essay from some other points of views – as a researcher and an editor.

This issue has major relevance with peer review. Although it has many limitations, peer-review is still the best available means used by editors to assess the suitability of a manuscript and to judge its merits for publication in scientific journals (2). Editors have always been looking for ways to improve the quality of peer review. It was thought that if we do not let reviewers become aware of the authors' identity, the fairness and the quality of peer review would be increased since it is believed that the manuscripts of well-known authors may be reviewed less critically (3). Therefore, many journals blind the referees to the authors' identity. However, complete blinding is not always possible, is time consuming, and in practice a reviewer can often figure out who the authors are from the clues left in the article (4-6). On the other hand, it was shown that, masking reviewers to authors' identity, at least in the way we usually do in biomedical journals, does neither significantly improve nor worsen the quality of peer review (7,8).

Although in most instances we cannot separate an "author" from his or her "article," the "article" is indeed the most important part since it is the final stage of a research study and it is the piece that would affect the body of evidence and our practice, no matter who the author is. Knowledge about the author just may help us to decide whether it was possible to conduct the work in his or her center or not. For many successful works the fame of the work has preceded

the name of its creator – we know perhaps more about Sherlock Holmes or Uncle Tom and his cabin than about their authors.

While it is very unlikely that a weak author writes a masterpiece, not all writing of a well-known author might have an acceptable quality. Even good scholars may commit misconduct both in scientific research and/or its presentation (9-15). Sometimes, reviewers and even editors overlook an apparent shortcoming in an article simply because they judge the authors and not the scientific merits of the article. They inclusively assume that a great scholar cannot develop a poor article and that an infamous researcher can never write something valuable. Had the reviewers been masked to the authors' name and fame, many of such fraudulent articles might have not gotten published.

This issue also relates to history of science and logic. Since ancient era, the name and fame of great scholars have seriously influenced the belief of people. Many people to prove the validity of their claims used to say "*magister dixit*" – they believe that a statement is (should be) correct because it is made by an authority. I, myself, have witnessed how an experienced editor accepted a submitted manuscript authored by a well-known researcher without peer reviewing it; that editor stated: "Who can review the work of that author?" This behavior is indeed an important issue in informal logic and mainly discussed by John Locke, an English philosopher and physician. It is usually known as "appeal to authority," "*argumentum ad verecundiam*," or "*ipse dixit*" and is a clear form of fallacy of defective induction. Had no one doubted the statements claimed by universally well-known authorities, the Earth would have been flat, stood still in the center of the universe, and orbited by the Sun and all other celestial bodies (16); solar eclipse would have been a sign of Gods' anger; heavy objects would have fallen faster than light objects; quantum mechanics would have been wrong, as stated by Einstein; and exorcism would have been used to treat psychotic patients, to give only a few examples.

This issue has been acknowledged earlier as reflected in many fields. *Justitia*, the Roman goddess of justice, whose statue adorns many courthouses across the world, carries a scale to weigh the current evidence and wears a blindfold not to pay attention to anything but the current evidence. And that is why in many courts the members of the jury are selected from those people completely strangers to the alleged person so that they can make a fair verdict – they presumably just investigate the current evidence not influenced by the background they might have had about the alleged person. Likewise, if we are going to have a fair peer review system to determine the merits of a scientific work, the juries (peer reviewers) should just examine the current evidence presented in the report of that work (the article) and not the identity and background of the author – they should judge the article, not the author(s). In this way, the reviewers should use all available means to investigate the validity (and usefulness to readers) of the reported work no matter what the gender, nationality, ethnicity, political beliefs, religion, race, or scientific degree of the author(s) are. Similar statements have earlier been announced by some official international associations (17).

Although in many fields, like literature, where the style of writing and wording are the essence of the work and hence the author and his or her talent in choosing appropriate words and writing become very important, in scientific writing, the audience of which are scholars in search of evidence-based facts mainly generated through certain well-defined scientific methodology, the role of the author is in fact not so important. In scientific setting, the author acts mainly as a fair observer and reporter – the eloquence of the reported text is not of paramount importance. Therefore, as long as the research methodology employed and the reporting format are in accord with accepted universal standards, and as long as we can understand the text, the author is not of any particular importance, whether he or she is a layperson or a first-class eloquent scientist. I believe, we should never judge an article based on its author(s), although we can judge an author based on his or her article(s).

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