

But I Don't Want to Be An Author

This situation occurred shortly after I finished my master's degree, when I decided to move to another lab to begin my doctoral work. I chose Dr. Jenkins's lab because of his well-known expertise in an area of pharmacokinetics in which I wanted to concentrate my career.

A few weeks after joining the lab, I thought I had made a mistake because I began feeling somewhat uncomfortable around him. He seemed overly nice and helpful to me, and he was always trying to be charming and funny. These behaviors struck me as clumsy and offputting, but in the two years I worked in his lab, he never made any romantic advances or overtures. Fortunately, as the months went on, I began feeling somewhat more comfortable around him, and I think he did around me.

The ethical incident that still bothers me involved a small grant that the lab got from a pharmaceutical company to generate some data on a compound that was of particular interest to Dr. Jenkins and me. It was agreed and contractually understood that our first manuscript would be published in one of the pharmaceutical company's publications rather than a peer-reviewed journal. We worked together on the project. While I was in charge of most of the data generation and interpretation, Dr. Jenkins also ran some experiments and contributed. Or at least he seemed to. The problem was that by the time I got to the lab later on in the morning, he had already been there for several hours and he'd give me his data and lab notes. At the end of a few months, we had generated enough findings to justify our writing the paper, which we did. And that's when the surprise came.

As we were adding some finishing touches, Dr. Jenkins said to me, "Mary, I've been very impressed with how you've done the lion's share of this project, so I want you to be the sole author of this paper. It will be good for your career. I don't need this publication, but it will look good on your CV, especially with you as sole author. So, it's yours. And don't say I never gave you anything, ha, ha, ha."

At first I was really thrilled about this. The only other publication I had was one where I was included with about a dozen other authors, and I was number 8 or 9 on the author list. I thought this opportunity would be really cool.

But then I began having second thoughts. Mostly, they involved the fact that I would be taking credit, as the sole author, for data that I didn't generate. Would that be a misrepresentation? Also, Dr. Jenkins from time to time made a suggestion for a modest change in this or that—which we duly noted in our records and reported to the pharmaceutical company—and that was fine. But those were his ideas that we incorporated into the protocol, not mine. Yet, as sole author, I would be taking credit for the whole thing.

As it happened, we did submit the paper with me as sole author. The pharmaceutical company was fine with it, as long as we acknowledged Dr. Jenkins at the end. Dr. Jenkins was fine with it, as he really didn't need the publication (and, maybe, as I look back on it, he didn't want his name on a non-peer reviewed publication). I went on from his lab to a satisfying career. But I've always been bothered by this kind of odd turn of authorship events where, instead of the usual problem of people demanding authorship credit when they don't deserve it, here's an individual who should have been listed as an author but refused.

Any thoughts?

Expert Opinion

Mary is right to feel uncomfortable for all the reasons she gives. The sole (or lead) author of a paper should not only be able to justify all the data in the paper, but assure its integrity, i.e., its truth and its source. That assurance cannot be credible or made in good faith if the author takes credit for someone else's contribution. Even if Mary acknowledges Dr. Jenkins at the end of the paper, that acknowledgement will misrepresent Dr. Jenkins' role because individuals so acknowledged are understood not to have made significant intellectual contributions. But Jenkins certainly did.

Also, as Mary described Dr. Jenkins's work methods, she was not in an adequate position to actually observe his data acquisition. Could Dr. Jenkins have carelessly collected that data or simply made it all up, and would his refusing authorship be an "out" for him—i.e., he could place all the culpability on Mary as sole author if allegations of data fabrication ever arose? Let us treat this as just a hypothetical, but it is certainly a liability of X taking credit for Y's work when X did not supervise or oversee and, thus, cannot vouchsafe its truth.

So what could Mary have done? Well, she could have insisted that Dr. Jenkins be second author, taking the "I simply can't take credit for your contributions—that would be misrepresentation" line of ethical arguing. If Jenkins still refused, Mary could have run Jenkins's experiments by herself and collected and published the data she generated, which she could certainly then claim as her own. Or, she could have refused authorship of the paper altogether, perhaps resulting in no paper and the ire of the pharmaceutical company.

It would have been nice for Dr. Jenkins to announce to Mary at the early stages of the paper his intention to have her be sole author. That at least could have given her some time to reflect on her situation and perhaps contemplate some of the strategies listed above. As it actually transpired, however, Mary's insisting that Jenkins be the second author by appealing to ethical arguments seems to us to be the least onerous of the options. Alternatively, Mary's duplicating Jenkins's experiments or refusing to submit the paper as sole author might have earned her Jenkins's ill will since it implies Mary's distrust of Jenkins's data. Of course, the failure to submit a paper altogether might mean the pharmaceutical company's never underwriting Jenkins's lab again. Considerations like these must have been especially distressing for Mary, who as a very junior member of the lab might feel that she must get along in order to go along. Nevertheless, this incident could have been a potent ethical moment for both Mary and Dr. Jenkins to remind themselves of what data and authorship integrity really mean.