

# Matrix Lesson 53

The “senior” author had nothing to do with the article to which his name is affixed

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“The multiauthored article is the standard in the medical sciences, where the politics of the laboratory and the academy often loom larger than the singularity of the argument or grace of its execution.” \*

\* Suzanne Poirer, PhD. Charting the Chart - An Exercise in Interpretation(s). *Literature and Medicine* 1992; 11(1): 1.

Presentations at the Matrix Conference often include references to the surgical literature. When the resident puts up his reference slide, the title and data are usually dwarfed by a half-page list of authors. The knowledgeable reader often wonders: "Who is the 'senior author' of this paper?"

There are many similarities between the "senior author" and the "senior surgeon" (see Matrix Lesson #93). Both are amorphous concepts magically bestowed on surgeons. Neither has rigorous qualifiers. These are titles that enhance the people they describe. These titles convey experience, involvement and sagacity.

But there is a major difference between the two. "Senior surgeon" is merely a name and a concept which is at least, even if only in the mind of the surgeon, intellectually honest. The surgeon really believes that he is a senior surgeon. He has performed surgery in the past and may be performing surgery now. At the least, he is participating in the endeavor of surgery.

Not so with many of the "senior" authors. In many cases, the title "senior author" is a bona fide fraud. The senior author of many papers in the literature has his name on the paper out of courtesy, fear, or, in a very few cases, respect for past performance. He usually has little to do with the actual writing of the paper, other than saying in the resident's lounge: "Wouldn't it be nice if someone wrote a paper on ...."

The major impact of the concept of the senior author is environmental, not medical. The amount of paper used for these publications is destroying untold numbers of trees. I am surprised that some environmentally conscious surgical resident has not exposed this by now, but I suppose there are job security issues. Surgical authorship is out of control!

Three surgeons can't sit down for coffee without walking away with plans for a new journal. Since the engine of academia and pseudo-academia (the academia of my life) is publishing, the philosophy is that if an already existing journal with its own network of acceptance exists,

why beat one's head against a wall? Get your own journal and publish your own papers! Or, more importantly, the papers of your friends.

A recent review of the "List of Referenced Journals" volume of the Index Medicus runs about two hundred pages. There are, on average, thirty journals listed on each page. That totals approximately six thousand journals. Most of these are monthly publications.

Now physicians are a pretty smart group. But is there enough original thought likely to benefit humanity to justify 4,800 medical journals? Here are some journal titles of interest. (If I may use a Dave Barry term) - I am not kidding!

- *Andrologica.*  
(I thought this was a Greco-Roman folk poem like Beowulf!)
- *Archives of Environmental Contamination.*  
(Written by the housekeeper in charge of the residents' lounge.)
- *Annals of Physiological Anthropology.*  
(Studying the bodily function of dead people. This is unlikely to benefit anyone currently in my Department, although I have some concerns about a few members.)
- *American Journal of Ortho-Psychiatry.*  
(Catering to mentally disturbed orthopedic surgeons.)
- *Australasian Physical and Engineering Sciences in Medicine.*  
(Edited by Paul Hogan.)

These multiple journals are the units of senior authorship. They are the chits on the game-board of medical-academic advancement. They serve one purpose only - to exponentially fatten the curriculum vitae (see Matrix Lesson #85). To fully appreciate the principles behind Matrix Lesson #53, we must define some terms:

- Authorship - n., state of an individual with faint familiarity with a scientific paper bearing his name.
- First author - n., outlined the paper, usually on the back of a progress note sheet.
- Second author - n., paid for the Xeroxing of the references.
- Third author - n, walked through the room where the paper was being written.

- Fourth author - n., has office in same building where paper was written.
- Fifth author - n., writes recommendations for authors 1-4.
- Senior author - n., has a loose, although senior position to authors 1-5 and is responsible for their career advancement.
- Acknowledged individual - responsible for writing the paper.

As a practical exercise in interpreting lesson #53 let's dissect a typical reference, in an attempt to further define the role of the senior author:

Gordon LA, Auerbach A (Red), Lombardi VA, Belichick W, and Jones KC. Anatomic Correlates in Pancreatic Surgery - Syntax, Simile and Synecchia. *Am J Anat Acta Physiolog Rheumatologica Scandinavica* (Dansk outlet) Supple. 2003; II: 148-54.

- Gordon LA - the "first author" - the grunt, the slave, the scrivener, the only one:
  - a) who really worked on the paper;
  - b) who knows the contents of the paper; and
  - c) who has read the paper.
- Auerbach A (Red) - the attending who suggested the paper.
- Lombardi VA - the surgeon who was assisting on the case when it was suggested that the paper be written.
- Belichick W - the surgeon whose secretary typed the paper.
- Jones KC - the Department Chairman, or person with the most influence over the second author, i.e. the senior author.

It is extremely easy, particularly for residents, to test the validity of lesson #53. Try this. Retrieve a paper from the institution in which the resident is enrolled. Get the senior author's name. Go up to him and say: "Professor Nodlinger, I enjoyed your recent paper in the *Journal of Inane Ramblings*, but one thing bothered me. How did you reconcile the data in Table III with the photograph?"

The blank look generated by this question is a testament to the value of Matrix Lesson #53.