



10 April 2017

Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: How many people does it take to write a paper?

Only a few. Most of the writing is done by two or three people.

If so, how do we end up with masthead listings with dozens of authors for papers in trials?

The median number of authors listed for papers indexed in PubMed to the publication type [randomized controlled trial] and published in the NEJM, JAMA, Lancet, and BMJ in 2016 is 17; range 3 to 65.

Authors listed in mastheads in 2016 NEJM, JAMA, Lancet, and BMJ publications indexed to randomized controlled trial in PubMed (counts as of 24 March 2017)

	No. pubs	Mdn. no. authors per publication	Range
NEJM	138	19	6-58
JAMA	67	14	4-65
Lancet	91	19	5-47
BMJ	11	9	3-18
Total	307	17	3-65

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) requirements for authorship are:

1. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work,
 2. Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content,
 3. Final approval of the version to be published,
- and
4. Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Is it reasonable to believe dozens of people meet the ICMJE authorship criteria?

The reason for mastheads with dozens of “authors” is because issues of authorship are not addressed until there is a paper to write and then it is too late for any rational system of authorship, so the default is to list “everybody”. You can be fairly certain that papers with dozens of “authors” come from groups with ad hoc authorship policies. Listing “everybody” would be like the movie industry listing everyone in the film as a “producer”.