



Dear Labby,
I used to work as a postdoc at a research institute. I am working in a biotech company now.

I have an authorship dispute with my former boss. Here is some background on it. I started and executed this project solely, from literature search, gene cloning and optimization, cell culture growth and optimization in search of the best condition for membrane transport protein expression, to protein purification, protein crystallization, data collection, and data processing. Before I left the lab we had very nice data sets for this project, but not enough to solve the protein structure. I had worked on this project for approximately 4 years. The structure was solved recently, and the boss submitted the paper for publication without my knowledge.

After I found out, the boss agreed to put my name only in the acknowledgments. I disagree and wrote two emails to him, to the authors on the manuscript, and to a couple of key members of the department. It seems not easy to persuade the boss to change his mind on my authorship.

Here I would like to have your advice for how to pursue and resolve this issue with the boss and/or have a third party involved. Is there any committee or organization responsible for resolving such authorship disputes? Do *Science* and *Nature* magazines have some rules on authorship disputes in terms of publication? Can I have somebody to represent me to deal with this issue if I feel necessary? Your advice would be invaluable to me.

—Yong Yin, PhD

Dear Dr. Yin,

Unfortunately, authorship disputes are all too common. Often it is a matter of miscommunication and/or misperceptions. A postdoc might underestimate what constitutes authorship (or at least what constitutes it for the lab head). At the same time, a lab head might—for whatever reasons—not be fully aware of how scientifically original and critical a postdoc's contribution has been. Under ideal circumstances, these issues are not left to vague perceptions or inadequately defined (or unstated) policies. Instead they are clearly and candidly laid out.

Regular lab meetings alone should help a postdoc see his or her work in the context of that of all other players in the lab. Do you have a sense that the same kinds of contributions you made to this project resulted in nonauthorship by other postdocs in the lab working on previous projects? Or do you see previous publications from this lab where authorship was granted for comparable contributions?

Regarding process, it is unclear from your query whether or not your former lab head replied to your emails. It is important to know her/his reasoning. Do you think your communications with the lab head and others at the institution reached administrative officials? If not, you might contact the Research Integrity Officer. It is certain that the appropriate officials would take an interest in your complaint.

As to journal policies, many of the better journals now require a signed statement from all authors that they have seen the submitted manuscript. (In some cases they are asked to state further that they are in agreement with its content.) Several leading journals have now gone a step further and require that the contributions of each author (conceptualization, design, execution, data analysis, manuscript preparation, etc.) be stated in a footnote. Obviously, these policies only cover those who are authors upon submission. It would be best for you to communicate first with the institution's Research Integrity Officer before contacting the journal where this paper has been submitted or has been published.

Your query is painful for Labby and most readers of the *ASCB Newsletter* because it reminds so many of us of what wonderful mentors we had, and that others were not so fortunate. While it is possible that your former lab head had entirely valid reasons not to make you an author, these should have been presented to you clearly.

However this turns out, your willingness to communicate your experience provides a service in emphasizing to us the responsibilities of both lab heads and postdocs in coming to a shared understanding of what constitutes authorship. Many of the postdoc organizations have realized the importance of this issue (see this column in the November 2009 *ASCB Newsletter*). Thank you for helping us all to visualize this important issue, albeit through the lens of your unfortunate difficulty. ■

—Labby

Direct your questions to labby@ascb.org. Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.