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Coauthorship and 'soft colonialism'

Ruth E Malone,¹ Joaquin Barnoya²

In the past 10 years, concern within the tobacco control community about the 'globalising' tobacco epidemic and new initiatives by funders have led more researchers from high-income English-speaking countries to develop collaborations with colleagues in low/middle-income countries (LMICs) where English is not the native language. This has resulted in more papers being submitted with a mix of authors from both types of countries. At *Tobacco Control*, we have begun to notice a pattern that we believe has negative implications for the non-English-speaking LMICs authors. This involves the submission of manuscripts with numerous spelling, grammatical and other errors by corresponding authors from LMICs.

Tobacco Control has always worked hard to link new authors from LMICs with a small pool of dedicated editors and reviewers who work with these authors to help them edit manuscripts so that their papers will have a better chance of making it through peer review. As an international journal, we have made a commitment to try to increase the success of our LMICs colleagues who have not had the benefits of research mentorship, presubmission peer review and publication, compared with those in English-speaking countries. There are social justice implications to

publishing decisions that generally favour authors from countries where there are longstanding academic traditions around peer-reviewed publications.¹ This is why it is so disappointing when we receive a poorly written manuscript and find that one (or several) of the authors is a native English speaker and often a senior, established investigator, who should have carried out a conscientious and detailed review before submission. These authors are failing in their duty to take full responsibility for the content of manuscripts on which their names are listed. We suspect that they would not let such papers go out if their names appeared first or if the paper was submitted early in their careers.

It is possible that in some cases, the corresponding author simply went ahead and submitted independently, not realising that criteria for authorship include having *all authors* sign off as approving the final version.² But if so, this is also a failure on the part of the more experienced native English-speaking authors in failing to mentor their colleagues about authorship expectations and the submission process. It is also possible that the experienced authors were very busy and expected that the journal copyediting staff would clean up the manuscript later. Regardless, every high-income country author must ask himself or herself whether, if they were the *sole* author of such a manuscript, they would send it out for their peers to review. To allow their less-experienced and non-native English-speaking colleagues to do so is to abdicate their responsibilities to them as mentors and partners.

Authorship with global colleagues is increasingly viewed favourably in academic

advancement reviews and is something each of us should be pursuing to learn from one another. Most authors who publish in the journal understand the harms of 'colonialism' and would not knowingly wish to foster it. But as we face a globalising tobacco control movement, we need to be aware that the peer-reviewed publications arena is a space as real as geographic boundaries. In either the publication space or geographic space, it is possible for exploitation to occur due to the same power differentials that shaped original, historically situated colonialism. If one plans to reap the benefit of such a coauthored publication on one's CV, one should work hand-in-hand with LMIC coauthors and carry out the work of mentoring, copyediting and polishing the manuscript—*before* submitting it to a journal.

To do otherwise is to be part of 'soft colonialism' in a peer-reviewed publishing arena, where high-income country researchers continue to have more resources, power and recognition as scientific experts than their colleagues in LMICs.

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