“New to the publication game”: Practice in the publication of student research

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Background: Despite clear guidelines, authorship remains a problematic issue for both postgraduate students and their supervisors. Attribution of authorship can be a vague and confusing area for postgraduate research students.

Methods: We interviewed 7 postdoctoral students, 7 academic staff Level A-E and 3 student advocates about experience, beliefs and norms of behaviour in the publication of papers resulting from student research. Participants were selected using stratified sampling in biomedical, clinical and social science research at two Australian universities.

Results: Participants reported widely divergent norms of behaviour in publication across disciplines both in criteria for inclusion as an author and in the value attributed to the order of authors. Authorship may reflect contribution to research but also may be based on other criteria such as seniority in the research team or contribution of key materials. Guidelines were rarely used and students usually deduced the ‘rules of engagement’ through example. Extreme cases of ‘theft of students’ work’ were rare but confusion and distress around blurred ethical standards was common sometimes leading to non-publication of work and breakdown in the supervisory relationship. Participants indicated aspects of individual and institutional support leading to good practice in publication of research.

Implications of research: Our research suggests that norms of behaviour run counter to Australian guidelines for responsible conduct in research publication. Improved understanding of accepted practices in authorship and supervision will provide a firm basis from which to build institutional support for good practice in publication of research.