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Authorship Forms amid COVID-19: Possible Source of Transmission and Need for Universal Digitalization

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Ever since its outbreak in December 2019, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has spread to more than 200 nations all over the globe. In the absence of any definite vaccine or treatment option, the response of healthcare workers has been overwhelming and praiseworthy. At the same time, the world has witnessed a robust knee-jerk reaction from researchers and scholars. Many journals and publishers have duly supported the endeavor providing fast-track review and free open-access publication options.

Authorship forms, notably copyright transfer forms, author's contribution forms and conflicts of interest forms, are the part and parcel of every research publication. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has laid down a well-defined set of recommendations for conducting, reporting, editing and publication of scholarly work in medical journals (1). Besides, ICMJE recommends using a standard disclosure of potential conflicts of interest form to generate a disclosure statement for a manuscript. However, only few journals abide by the ICMJE recommendations. Hence, authorship forms vary markedly from one journal to the other. Moreover, although many journals provide authors the opportunity to fill these forms online, unfortunately, a large number of journals do not offer this facility even till the present date. An uncountable number of journals specifically demand hand-written signatures of authors; this requires the form to be downloaded, printed, hand-signed, scanned, and mailed back to the editor. This endeavor can be challenging under the current restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, with personal printing and scanning facilities unavailable to all authors. Very often, the same document has to be circulated among multiple authors to obtain their signatures. Under prevailing circumstances, sharing of documents may inadvertently lead to the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) from one author to another. It is particularly relevant considering the remarkable stability of SARS-CoV-2 on inanimate objects and surfaces (2). An *in vitro* study has shown that the SARS-CoV-2 can be recovered from paper even after 30 minutes of inoculation (3).

Universal digitalization is the need of the hour. Journals should encourage all types of authorship forms to be filled online. The age-old tradition of hand-written signatures should immediately be replaced by name initials obtained digitally. Universal adoption of the ICMJE conflicts of interest form would be a welcome change as it can be filled online and does not require any physical human involvement. Alternatively, if hand-written signatures need to be obtained, journals should come up with electronic forms where photographs of hand-written signatures can be directly incorporated and circumvent the need for printing or scanning. Besides, rather than all the authors, only the corresponding author/guarantor's approval should be made mandatory who would sign and declare potential conflicts of interest on behalf of all the co-authors.

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