

When the Death of a Colleague Meets Academic Publishing: A Call for Compassion

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ABSTRACT

What would you do if someone approached you to sign a publishing form on your partner's behalf within mere weeks of their death? After my trusted, brilliant coworker died, I grappled daily between grieving her loss and driving productivity on her assigned projects. Because, after all, the world keeps spinning, research progresses, and manuscripts have to be published. In attempting to honor her memory through post-mortem authorship on publications, I was faced with a unique quandary of how to procure a signature on legal publishing forms, which is often requested during the publication process. Little guidance is available for corresponding authors on this issue, so I call on academic publishers to create post-mortem authorship policies that prioritize compassion, dignity, and rationality in the wake of grief.

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"Thank you for your email. The deceased author policy for our journal may be found here."

I folded my arms and sighed, frustrated. Our team's beloved statistician died only the day before, and it was agonizing to even request a waiver for her to sign copyright release and disclosure forms. This callous, automatic response did not convey the compassion or empathy that I was hoping to receive. The journal had finally accepted our revised manuscript for publication many months after our statistician analyzed the data, yet before she was hospitalized and succumbed to her illness. She had worked in our institution for decades, amassing an impressive publication history. She was an enduring voice of reason and a reliable constant on our team. It was hard to imagine our team without her.

The deceased authors' policy for the journal directed that retaining her as a co-author would require 2 things. First, as corresponding author, I would need to submit a letter attesting that the deceased author met all authorship criteria at the time of her death—easy enough. Second, the deceased author's estate or trust would need to sign the copyright transfer and financial disclosure forms on her behalf.

I paused. The journal was directing me to approach her family, deep in their immediate grief, to sign a few forms?

Reading on, should I not be able to produce said signed documents, the manuscript would be withdrawn, or all co-authors would have to submit a letter approving her removal as a co-author.

I re-read the 1-page policy over and over, pondering how I should handle this. Very few things in publishing are critically time-sensitive—I could wait a while to try to obtain her estate's signatures on the forms. But how long to wait? When, and how, should I approach her family?

Over dinner that night, I asked my husband what he would prefer if our family was in the same situation. "I would be enraged if anyone e-mailed me about that," he said, "even months after you die. The last thing I'd want is a random e-mail asking for my signature on some forms so life can continue on without you."

Given the weight of my colleague's death, my article-in-limbo felt incredibly small. Unavoidably, though, publications and grants are the currency of academic research.¹ One must publish research findings to get grants, and one must get grants to fund research. Publications are necessary for promotion, demonstrating expertise, and disseminating research findings to impact policy and patient care. A researcher's career relies on their publication track record, hence the phrase: "publish or perish."²

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I was particularly excited about this manuscript, which underscored the significance for a research proposal I was preparing to submit in the fall. It was an essential demonstration of my productivity and relationships with my research team, boosting my competitiveness for the grant proposal. I was also feeling external pressure to move on to other projects—I wanted this off my plate. I was frustrated and angry that keeping her as a co-author on this manuscript wasn't going to be simple. I was grieving the hole that her death left in our team. I bittersweetly remembered our interactions that brought us closer together amidst the monotony of work tasks. I would miss her sage advice on my journey as a new mother and the delicious peaches she would bring me from a vendor near her house. In meetings, she would share pictures of her adventures from the weekend before: mountain-biking, visiting a reptile sanctuary, camping, hiking, and more. She extended invitations to listen to her play in a local orchestra. I had sat in her car only a few weeks before her death, chatting amiably as she graciously offered me a ride to the airport.

All of my memories and emotions about her worth and value as my colleague felt ludicrously reduced to her signature on a few forms that she had signed for the same journal for other manuscripts before her death.

These forms are inescapable components of academic publishing, and there doesn't appear to be clear consensus on approaching these formalities post-mortem. In general, most journals require that all listed authors meet International Committee of Medical Journal Editors authorship criteria, which may or may not be appropriate for deceased authors.^{3,4} The issue here seemed not to be whether my colleague was deserving of authorship; rather, I simply needed her signature for legal documents (copyright transfer and financial disclosures).

The *American Medical Association (AMA) Manual of Style, A Guide for Authors and Editors*, 11th edition—a commonly cited reference for scientific writing, editing, and publishing—provides the following guidance on this issue in chapter 5:

"In the case of death or incapacitation of an author during the manuscript submission and review or publication process, a family member, an individual with power of attorney, or the corresponding author can confirm that the deceased or incapacitated person should be listed as an author. In this event, the corresponding author can forward correspondence from the individual representing the deceased author and can provide information on the deceased or incapacitated author's contributions. Designation that an author is deceased can be made in the Acknowledgment or Article Information section of the manuscript/article."⁵

While this guidance helps to inform whether and how a deceased author should be included on a manuscript, it does not explicitly address signatures on publishing forms for post-mortem authorship. This gap could be filled by journal- and publisher-specific policies. One interpretation of the guidance would allow a corresponding author to sign on the deceased authors' behalf. Currently, corresponding

authors are put in the impossible role of approaching a grieving family to obtain their signature. The onus and burden of handling this difficult scenario should not lie solely on the corresponding authors' and deceased family's shoulders.

Compassion—the ethical principle of "sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it"⁶—is an essential concept in clinical medicine, health care policy, and education. It is both a personal and collective responsibility to others, grounded in empathy and sympathy. Although post-mortem authorship needs are uncommon, I call on academic publishers to apply the tenets of compassion to create procedures and policies for handling these fragile circumstances. These policies also have the potential to honor the dignity of an author's legacy and kin by minimizing unnecessary and painful experiences. Finally, grounded in rationality, a deceased author's head of estate may not be the most logical choice for signature on these forms, which are intended to consent to copyright transfer and disclose financial conflicts of interest. Given that family members are often not privy to such, their signature on these forms does not seem appropriate—rather, perhaps a supervisor or corresponding author's signature should suffice. Given that the author's conflicts of interest will not change, these forms should also be kept on file for future reference and use.

I will probably forever question whether I made the right choice to pursue my colleague's husband's signature in the wake of her death. With each e-mail kindly requesting a reply, my internal code of ethics was screaming at me to leave him alone. I arranged to meet him at his house to get his signature. Entering the house, I felt the hole of my colleague's death grow even larger. I was standing in her foyer that was in the background of her Zoom calls; her beloved cat ambled by as he had many times before to interrupt our virtual meetings; and her workspace looked untouched in the many months since her death. I was there for less than 2 minutes as her husband politely signed these forms, but I wish I never had to ask him for his signature at all.



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