

# Are names important?

Martin Fenner, Gobbledygook

February 17, 2008

A Nature News article last week talked about the confusion that happens if a number of authors have the same or similar names (Scientific publishing: Identity crisis). This is apparently a special issue in China because of the difficulties transliterating Chinese characters into English and the use of only a limited number of surnames. The Nature Nanotechnology – Asia Pacific and Beyond Forum has a discussion about this topic (What’s in an Asian name?).

The difficulties for German authors are much smaller, and this is probably true for other European languages. We do have a fair number of surnames, but umlauts in our names (e.g. in the very popular last name Müller) are frequently lost. As Cesar Sanchez pointed out in the Nature Nanotechnology discussion mentioned above, Pubmed started using diacritics, including umlauts, last year (Diacritics in PubMed Displays and Searching). And the American Physical Society started to allow Chinese, Japanese and Korean authors to use names in their own language (Editorial: Which Wei Wang?).

But the problem is the same. There are at least 6 different M. Fenner in the MEDLINE database, one of them my cousin. Using the middle initial can help. I try to publish as MH Fenner, and very smart people will figure out that papers written by H Fenner are from my father. And what happens when you marry? My wife and I have different last names (which is uncommon in Germany) and one small reason was the scientific track record (including publications) connected to this name. Some of the other issues are nicely summarized in a PLOS post by Richard Cave (Unique Author Identification, thanks Cesar Sanchez).

The solution? We need unique identifiers for authors. I recently wrote about ResearcherID, one such effort announced this January by Thomson Scientific. The problem with ResearcherID is that author identity is a very sensitive issue and many people will be reluctant to rely on a private company for that. Elsevier is doing something similar in their Scopus database (The Scopus Author Identifier).

Author identifiers should really come from a neutral organization such as CrossRef (a publishing organization that brought us the DOI to uniquely identify a scientific paper). They held a meeting with various interested parties in February 2007 (CrossRef Author ID meeting). Because of the number of parties involved and the different issues, this is a very slow process. And what is the U.S. Library

of Medicine doing on this issue? After all, they publish MEDLINE, the most important database of biomedical research.