

Debate

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Do we need a Unique Scientist ID for publications in biomedicine?

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Abstract

Background: The PubMed database contains nearly 15 million references from more than 4,800 biomedical journals. In general, authors of scientific articles are addressed by their last name and forename initial.

Discussion: In general, names can be too common and not unique enough to be search criteria. Today, Ph.D. students, other researchers and women publish scientific work. A person may not only have one name but several names and publish under each name. A Unique Scientist ID could help to address people in peer-to-peer (P2P) networks. As a starting point, perhaps PubMed could generate and manage such a scientist ID.

Summary: A Unique Scientist ID would improve knowledge management in science. Unfortunately in some of the publications, and then within the online databases, only one letter abbreviates the author's forename. A common name with only one initial could retrieve pertinent citations, but include many *false drops* (retrieval matching searched criteria but indisputably irrelevant).

Background

The National Library of Medicine (NLM) created PubMed, which is one of the largest literature databases in biomedicine. The database contains nearly 15 million references from more than 4,800 biomedical journals. In general, authors of scientific articles are addressed by their last name and forename initial. For example, a search for "Lee C", a common Chinese name, would retrieve over 9000 hits (Fig 1).

Discussion

In general, names can be too common and not unique enough to be search criteria. Modern life advances this point. In former times only a few scientists, normally pro-

fessors in universities and academic health sciences centers, published scientific results of their work under their names. Most scientists were men. Their names were consistent and did not change by marriage. Today, Ph.D. students, other researchers and women publish scientific work. Women may be using a married name, which may be a compound name for authorship. Thus a person may not only have one name but several names and publish under each name. In Germany, there can be nameconfusion for titles of nobility from former times or for composed names. Claus-Wilhelm von der Lieth (with 'Claus-Wilhelm' as forename and 'von der Lieth' as surname) is cited in several mutations, such as 'Vonderlieth CW', 'Lieth von der CW' or only 'Lieth CW'.

The screenshot shows the PubMed search results page for the query 'Lee C'. The search bar at the top contains 'Lee C' and the results are displayed in a list format. The first five results are visible, each with a checkbox, a document icon, a title, and a link to 'Related Articles, Links'. The search results are as follows:

Item	Author(s)	Title	Journal	PMID	Status
1	Currier SC, Lee CK, Chang BS, Bodeff AL, Pai GS, Job L, Lagae LG, Al-Gazali LJ, Eyaad WM, Enns G, Dobyns WB, Walsh CA	Mutations in POMT1 are found in a minority of patients with Walker-Warburg syndrome.	Am J Med Genet A.	15637732	[PubMed - as supplied by publisher]
2	Fung CP, Hsieh TL, Tan KH, Loh CH, Wu JS, Li CC, Chang FY, Siu LK, Yen MY, Wang LS, Wong WW, Kao WF, Hsu JH, Lin TH, Huang FY, Lee CH	Rapid creation of a temporary isolation ward for patients with severe acute respiratory syndrome in Taiwan.	Infect Control Hosp Epidemiol.	15636288	[PubMed - in process]
3	Wong DW, Batt SB, Lee CC, Robertson GH	High-activity barley alpha-amylase by directed evolution.	Protein J.	15635937	[PubMed - in process]
4	Lee CC, Chen SC	Images in emergency medicine.	Ann Emerg Med.	15635320	[PubMed - in process]
5	Chern CH, How CK, Wang LM, Lee CH, Graff L	Decreasing clinically significant adverse events using feedback to emergency physicians of telephone follow-up outcomes.	Ann Emerg Med.	15635301	[PubMed - in process]

The interface also shows navigation options like 'Page 1 of 480' and 'Next', and a sidebar with various PubMed services and related resources.

Figure 1
PubMed search for 'Lee C'. A simple search for 'Lee C' results over 9000 articles from PubMed.

Especially with a view to the future, such a Unique Scientist ID could help to address people in peer-to-peer (P2P) networks. One such network based article reference P2P network is Bibster [1]. Bibster is a Java-based system which assists researchers in managing, searching and sharing bibliographic metadata in a peer-to-peer network.

How can one easily find articles written by a particular person? A Unique Scientist ID could help to address persons. A Unique Scientist ID should contain all the versions of a scientist's name. As a starting point, perhaps PubMed could generate and manage such a scientist ID. Adding the Scientist ID should become as routine as adding an email address to the article's citation.

Conclusion

A Unique Scientist ID would improve knowledge management in science. At the moment authors of publications are only addressed in most online databases by name, initials and address. Unfortunately in some of the publications, and then within the online databases, only one letter abbreviates the author's forename. A search for a special author is successful if the name is quite unique or a combination of authors is used for the search. In such a case, a common name with only one initial could retrieve pertinent citations, but include many *false drops* (retrieval matching searched criteria but indisputably irrelevant).

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed equally.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

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