

Debate

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

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Published: 22 March 2005

Received: 11 January 2005

*Biomedical Digital Libraries* 2005, **2**:1 doi:10.1186/1742-5581-2-1

Accepted: 22 March 2005

This article is available from: <http://www.bio-diglib.com/content/2/1/1>

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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 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 citation and a link to 'Related Articles, Links'. The search results are sorted by relevance, and the page number is 1 of 480.

1: [Currier SC, Lee CK, Chang BS, Bodell 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.* 2005 Jan 6; [Epub ahead of print] PMID: 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.* 2004 Dec;25(12):1026-32. PMID: 15636288 [PubMed - in process]

3: [Wong DW, Batt SB, Lee CC, Robertson GH.](#) High-activity barley alpha-amylase by directed evolution. *Protein J.* 2004 Oct;23(7):453-60. PMID: 15635937 [PubMed - in process]

4: [Lee CC, Chen SC.](#) Images in emergency medicine. *Ann Emerg Med.* 2005 Jan;45(1):94. No abstract available. PMID: 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.* 2005 Jan;45(1):15-23. PMID: 15635301 [PubMed - in process]

**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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