

Ghostwriting and Guest Authorship: Unveiling the Mask of Deception in Medical Research

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Every day, medical editors are shaping and producing documents that convey critical scientific information, leading to better outcomes and healthier lives. As the medical community strives for excellence in research and publication, two persistent concerns threaten the very foundation of our scholarly endeavors: ghost writing and guest authorship.¹ These practices, often shrouded in secrecy, undermine the integrity of medical research, compromise the credibility of our journals, and potentially harm patients.²

Medical ghostwriting is a new term. The ghostwriters in medicine are medical writers used by pharmaceutical companies or contract research organizations and medical communication agencies that serve the industry.^{2,3} Some medical writers are employed by the industry or its service agencies; others are self-employed and work under contract. Ghostwriting is also considered to be a form of plagiarism, unethical behavior which could even go as far as to cause health problems for the population.³

Ghost writing, where individuals not listed as authors contribute substantially to manuscripts, is a pervasive problem. This lack of transparency obscures the true origins of research, making it difficult to discern conflicts of interest and assess the validity of findings.⁴ Articles written by medical writers are published in medical journals. These articles can influence doctors and policy makers in their decisions that affect health. Therefore, the articles have marketing potential and there is a feeling that articles associated with manufacturers of pharmaceuticals make exaggerated promises and omit information that might disadvantage their products.⁵

Guest authorship another issue, where prominent researchers lend their names to papers without meaningful contribution, is equally troubling. This practice not only misrepresents the true authors but also perpetuates a culture of academic dishonesty. Reputed and renowned scientists, who have not participated in the conduct of the study or in the manuscript preparation, are enrolled to allow their names to be mentioned as authors. This phenomenon

is harmful not only because it suppresses the contribution of ghost-authors but also because the guest “authors” bestow underserved credibility for a paper⁶

To address these concerns, we propose the following:

1. Journals should require detailed contributor ship statements, outlining specific contributions.
2. Authors must declare all potential conflicts of interest and funding sources.
3. Institutions should establish clear policies on authorship and contributor ship.
4. Researchers should adhere to guidelines set forth by organizations like the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

As editors, researchers, and clinicians, we must uphold the highest standards of integrity and transparency. By acknowledging and addressing ghost writing and guest authorship, we can ensure the credibility and reliability of medical research, ultimately benefiting patients and advancing our field.

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