

CORRUPTED SCIENCE

Ghostwriting



Ghostwriting in Science

In academic and journalistic circles plagiarism is a serious matter. We instruct students in the methods of citing sources when paraphrasing other people's ideas and of using quotation marks when phrases or sentences are taken verbatim from other people's works. Using phrases from other sources without attribution is treated as a serious offense within the academic community.

Contrast this with a common practice in medical publications of "ghostwriting." A company that wishes to publish an editorial or review an article supporting one of its products contracts out with a finder-firm that locates a prominent academic scientist and offers that person a pre-written article or essay to sign for a respectable fee. The finder-firm will locate a journal and arrange for publication. The academic scientist is permitted to edit the article.

The reader is usually unaware that a company has contracted the published editorial or review essay and that the author was paid by the company to write the piece.



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Revealed: How Drug Firms ‘Hoodwink’ Medical Journals

Pharmaceutical giants hire ghostwriters to produce articles—then put doctors’ names on them.

“Hundreds of articles in medical journals claiming to be written by academic doctors have been penned by ghostwriters in the pay of drug companies, an *Observer* inquiry reveals.” *

* Antony Barnett, public affairs editor, *The Observer*, Sunday Dec. 7, 2003.

Ghostwriting: Journal Response

- How prevalent is ghostwriting?
- Reasons behind the commercial pressure of ghostwritten articles:
 - Drug companies need the voice of physicians for off-label uses of their drugs.
 - Transparency might show that the company was violating the law.



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Ghostwritten Drug Articles: a common practice?

An executive of Wyeth-Ayerst was quoted as saying:

“It was common practice in the pharmaceutical industry to have articles written by free lancers and signed by prominent scientists.” *

* A. Kaufman and A. Julien. Scientists helped industry to push diet drug. *Hartford Courant*, April 10, 2000, p. A1; A8.



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“Recently, I was shown a letter written to an academic anesthesiologist that seriously undermines the integrity of the publication process as it applies to scientific peer-reviewed journals. The full text of the letter, minus any identifiers, is reproduced herein:” * (next slide...)

- David Cullen

* David J. Cullen, Ghostwriting in scientific anesthesia journals *Anesthesiology* 7(2):195-196 (August 1997).



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Dear Dr. _____:

Thank you for agreeing to review the enclosed article titled _____. As mentioned during our phone conversation, _____ is working with _____ on publishing this paper. We'd like to submit this article for publication as soon as possible. Please give the article a cursory review and let me know within a few days if you are interested in authoring this paper. If so, please send any revisions to me by Friday, September 6th.

Please feel free to take complete editorial control, adding, changing, or deleting whatever you feel is necessary. (We'd like the neurosurgery section to be expanded (sic) a bit.) Indicate your changes on the enclosed copy. We will make these changes and return a manuscript, styled according to the journal's guidelines, for you to submit. _____ will obtain permission from the publishers to use borrowed figures/graphics. If you prefer to work from a disk, please let us know.

We've targeted *Journal of Clinical Anesthesia* as the journal for this article. If you have another journal in mind, please let me know. _____ will pay you \$1000 for authoring this article. If you have any questions, please call. My direct line is _____. I'm looking forward to talking to you.

Thank you.
Sincerely yours,
Managing Editor

Excerpta Medica

In 2000 the *Hartford Courant* broke the following story:

“In 1994, Wyeth signed a \$180,000 contract with a New Jersey medical publishing company called Excerpta Medica that offered pharmaceutical companies an invaluable tool: ready-made scientific articles placed in leading medical journals, and carrying the imprimatur of influential academic leaders.” The writer of the article was a free-lancer who was paid around \$5,000 to research and write the article according to company standards. “The author was often a top university scientist who was paid \$1,500 to review the work and assign his or her name to it for publication...both Excerpta and American Home Products, now the parent company of Wyeth-Ayerst have defended the practice, saying academic authors had final say over the manuscript.”*

* Source: A. Kaufman and A. Julien. Scientists helped industry to push diet drug. *Hartford Courant*, April 10, 2000, p. A1; A8.

Ghostwriting spreads to mainline medical journals

“Scientists are accepting large sums of money from drug companies to put their names to articles endorsing new medicines that they have not written—a growing practice that some fear is putting scientific integrity in jeopardy.”

“Originally, ghostwriting was confined to medical journal supplements sponsored by the industry, but it can now be found in all major journals...scientists named as authors will not have seen the raw data they are writing about...” *

* Sarah Boseley. Scandal of scientists who take money for papers ghostwritten by drug companies. *The Guardian*, February 7, 2002.

Ghostwriting Common in Medical Journals

According to a report in *The Observer* (UK), “hundreds of articles in medical journals claiming to be written by academics or doctors have been penned by ghostwriters in the pay of drug companies.”

“Estimates suggest that almost half of all the articles published in journals are by ghostwriters. While doctors who have put their names to the papers can be paid handsomely for ‘lending’ their reputations, the ghostwriters remain hidden.”

* Antony Barnett. Revealed: how drug firms ‘hoodwink’ medical journals. *The Observer*, December 7, 2003.

Prevalence of Ghost Authorship

Flanagin et al. surveyed authors from a randomly chosen list of 1,179 articles. Questionnaires were returned by 809 corresponding authors; 93 responses (11%) indicated ghost authorship had occurred.*

* A. Flanagin, L.A. Carey, P.B. Fontanarose et al. Prevalence of articles with honorary authors and ghost authors in peer-reviewed medical journals. *Journal of American Medical Association* 280:222-224.