

Guests, ghosts and trust

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TITLE Guest authorship and ghostwriting in publications related to Rofecoxib: a case study of industry documents from Rofecoxib litigation

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SUMMARY

Guest authors on papers are authors whose contributions do not merit full authorship; ghost writers do make significant contributions, but their names may not appear at all. Ross et al. were medical consultants in litigation against Merck related to Rofecoxib from 1996 to 2004, and as such they had unique access to millions of company documents.

This paper considers 250 documents related to the authorship of non-pharmacological clinical trials or scientific reviews involving an external academic author. Sixteen of 20 papers based on clinical trials designed, financed and run by the company had an external academic investigator as a guest first author; the company employees designated as first authors in a pre-publication status report appeared as an author in 14 of these 16 papers, usually as the final author. Some of the manuscripts were produced for the company by medical publishing companies before guest authors were identified. Medical publishing companies were also recruited to ghostwrite scientific reviews. Revisions based on reviewers' comments were sometimes made by those companies, and external academic authors were identified subsequently.

Guest authors were offered honoraria of \$750–\$2,500 for their services (refused by one guest author). Of 96 relevant published papers, 22 of 24 (92%) trial articles and 36 of 72 (50%) reviews disclosed company financial support or sponsorship or financial reward to the author.

COMMENT

Authorship of published papers brings recognition for work done and responsibility for that work. It is important for the careers of authors and for the standing of their institutions. The criteria for authorship are, therefore, important.¹ Guest authorship and ghostwriting undermine this principle by giving recognition without responsibility for guest authors and neither recognition nor responsibility for ghostwriters. This paper extends previous evidence² that these practices are common. However, in an increasingly commercial world, does the practice of guest authorship and ghostwriting really matter? After all, should

a reader not judge a paper solely on its scientific merit (i.e. content), and should the commercial axiom of 'let the buyer (i.e. the reader) beware' not apply?

The reality is that readers spend precious time reading journals because they want to be well informed. They need to be confident that they can rely on the information and opinions they read as being as accurate and as impartial as possible. They do not want to have to wonder whether they are reading an advertisement or part of a sales strategy. Seeing the names of the responsible (and, in theory, accountable) authors and their institutional affiliations is an important contribution to their confidence. In short, readers are looking for that other commercial axiom, of 'utmost good faith'.

What prevents a system, in which readers seek reliable, unbiased information from authors they do not know, from seizing up? In a word: trust. This is the ingredient that allows the system to work. Individuals, universities, institutions and commercial organisations all want their work to be well known and accepted, and in achieving this they recognise the value of 'a good name'. Authorship is important and journals, in particular, should support 'good names' by demanding clear criteria for authorship such as those recommended by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE).³ These criteria require that an author makes a 'substantial' contribution to a study, to writing any consequent article and its final approval. Further, the ICMJE states that all authors should meet these criteria and all meeting these criteria should be authors. Journals should justify their readers' trust by insisting on the axiom of 'utmost good faith' and denying publication of papers involving guest authors and ghostwriters.

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