

Whose article is it anyway?

A practice of concern to editors, authors, and readers of medical journals was glaringly exposed on May 23 in the *Dallas Morning News*. The newspaper reported that Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories, maker of the weight-loss drug dexfenfluramine (Redux), had "paid ghostwriters for articles promoting obesity treatments and then used prominent researchers to publish the work [in journals] under their names". Lawsuit depositions showed that Wyeth had paid Excerpta Medica* (Belle Mead, NJ, USA), a medical communications company, about US\$200 000 for at least ten articles, commissioned before the drug was pulled from the market in 1997. Jean Dolan, executive vice-president of Excerpta, says "these were not promotional articles. We're dealing with medical education. Our job was to educate doctors to make an appropriate decision". But medical writers involved in ghost authoring say such "education" can be skewed.

The use of ghost authors—individuals not named as authors but who contribute substantially to the preparation of an article—is not uncommon, says Drummond Rennie, a deputy editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. A survey by Rennie and colleagues showed that 11% (range 7–16%) of articles published in 1996 in six peer-reviewed journals involved the use of ghost authors (*JAMA* 1998; 280: 222–24). "The practice is well-known, scandalous, and outrageous. It is a perfect illustration of deceptive authorship practices for commercial reasons", says Rennie.

Two of the Wyeth-supported articles were published in peer-reviewed medical journals before Redux production was halted. One, a review by Albert Stunkard, appeared in the *American Journal of Medicine** (1996; 100: 230–36). Stunkard says the article was commissioned by Excerpta and that they suggested he submit it to *AJM*. "I thought Excerpta wanted an article they could excerpt for one of their journals and that the honorarium was from them. I didn't know that Wyeth was involved", he says.

Stunkard's review, which he says he wrote himself, was published before Lee Goldman became editor of *AJM*. "We don't want it to happen again, and we've put safeguards in place", says Goldman, who routinely receives and rejects queries from "writing companies" asking if he would be interested in their projects. He is also alert to clues of drug-company involvement

in articles sent to *AJM*. "We've rejected at least one because it had some lingo that seemed too much like company-speak. A call to the author led to an acknowledgment of 'help'."

Although *AJM* requires disclosure of assistance, "we don't polygraph people to make sure they disclose honestly. We ask them to tell us if they have a shred of guilt, and if they say they don't, we need to have another reason to be suspicious". Disclosure of drug-company support for original research is less of an issue, he says, because the presumption is that "the data speak for themselves", but changes may be needed in the authors' interpretation of the data. "My main concerns are when people try to obfuscate—or when, as sometimes happens, 'supported by an unrestricted educational grant' means 'ghostwritten by'."

Excerpta receives unrestricted educational grants to develop journal articles, but "any work done by the company [Excerpta] is done under the direction of the authors", says Dolan. Although the drug companies involved review the articles, "if they recommend changes, the author doesn't have to accept them". Dolan adds that journal editors concerned about bias "are negating the peer-review process, which will detect imbalances that any author may introduce into a paper".

"That argument is unacceptable", counters Richard Smith, editor of the *British Medical Journal*. "Peer review is not a cleansing process whereby whatever has gone through it is perfect no matter what its origins. It's not good at detecting fraud—it assumes that everything has been done honestly." George Lundberg, former editor of *JAMA*, now editor of peer-reviewed *Medscape General Medicine*, adds: "There is no way reviewers can ascertain who did or did not write a paper. That relies on honest disclosure and a proper level of suspicion by the editors."

Even with the best safeguards, ghost-authored articles containing drug-company "nuggets" may slip through, notes Ronni Sandroff, a New York medical writer and editor. Some time ago, Sandroff wrote two cancer-pain articles "for MD signatures" for submission to peer-reviewed journals. "I was told exactly what the drug company expected and given explicit instructions about what to play up and what to play down—whether to enhance broader off-label uses of the

pain product or go strictly by the FDA." Ghost-authored papers "build the reference list", notes Sandroff. "Once it's published, the company's point is in print. Someone else has said it, so it looks like it's established fact—but it's basically their positioning of the drug." In the past, she adds, "this kind of thing was done in supplements. But now everyone knows that supplements are sponsored" so those references have less value.

For Lundberg, the supplement issue is important. "Some publishers have taken large amounts of money to publish supplements in prestigious journals because of the panache associated with the journal's name. But they have applied less rigorous rules to everything about the supplement." Because supplements are often "tainted", he says, they were not done for any prestigious AMA journals during his tenure.

Behind the scenes

I recently had my first and last experience as a "ghostwriter" for a medical communications company. I agreed to do two reviews for a supplement to appear under the names of respected "authors". I was given an outline, references, and a list of drug-company-approved phrases. I was asked to sign an agreement stating that I would not disclose anything about the project. I was pressured to rework my drafts to position the product more favourably, and was shown another company-produced review as an example—it read like bad promotional writing. I asked the company to reduce my fee and rewrite the drafts themselves. ML

Wherever the article appears, "the reader has a right to expect that the person whose name is on an article in a scientific journal is the person who wrote it", says bioethicist Arthur Caplan (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA). "I don't think we should have to be looking for ghosts, goblins, or any other sprites that might have been involved but aren't credited or acknowledged." The offer of the help of a ghost author, he says, "is a lure to some people because it's an easy way to get a publication and covers the fact that they aren't good writers, or are too busy to do it themselves. But none of these seem to me to be effective reasons or justifications".

Marilynn Larkin **

* owned by Reed Elsevier, owners of *The Lancet*

** Author of *Redux: The Revolutionary Weight Loss Drug*; New York: Avon Books, 1997, written with no drug company influence.