



ISMPP Issues and Actions Committee “Ghostwriting” and the Professional Medical Writer

ISMPP is committed to undertaking a set of educational initiatives and reinforce best practices concerning the role of the **professional medical writer**.¹ Professional medical writers come from diverse backgrounds, and usually have advanced degrees in life sciences, including physicians, pharmacists, nurses, and PhDs. They often have associations with academic institutions or the pharmaceutical industry. Some professional medical writers are employees of pharmaceutical companies or medical communications agencies, while others work on a freelance basis or as consultants. Professional medical writers are individuals who have combined their knowledge of science with an ability to effectively communicate through writing. This communication includes development of manuscripts based on scientific or clinical data, which often involves conducting a thorough literature search to identify and assess publications that provide additional scientific evidence relevant to the topic.

Professional medical writers are typically involved from the beginning of the writing process and through to the completion of the manuscript. They often play a role in preparing figures and tables, tracking author feedback, and performing other time-consuming tasks to enhance the quality of the manuscript, thus freeing the authors to focus on the publication’s overall content, tone and accuracy. Professional medical writers are also responsible for understanding and adhering to individual journal requirements related to content, style, format, word count, and disclosure guidelines, such as authorship criteria, financial information and potential conflict of interest.² Like statisticians and researchers, professional medical writers provide an important contribution to the publications process. The question that is often asked is whether a professional medical writer should be listed as an author of a manuscript on which they have worked. Each situation must be assessed individually, and their contribution measured against the criteria for authorship defined by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), which states an author of a medical manuscript must meet all three of the following criteria³:

1. Conception and design, or acquisition of the data, or analysis and interpretation of the data
2. Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content
3. Final approval of the version to be published

Full transparency is critical to the medical publication process, including defining the involvement of those involved in the clinical research, data analysis, and medical writing of the published manuscript. Thus, disclosing the contribution of the professional medical writer is best practice in the publication process, and it is essential that the specific contribution of the professional medical writer is fully acknowledged in the publication.²

Ghostwriting

Recently, heightened attention has been focused on the use of unacknowledged medical

writers and their involvement in medical publications. This practice is referred to as "**ghostwriting**". The role of the professional medical writer as an appropriate and fully acknowledged member of the publication team is distinctly different from that of "**ghostwriters**", so it is important that a professional medical writer not be confused with a "ghost writer." Ghostwriters are individuals who contribute substantially to a medical publication but do not appear on the byline and are not acknowledged for their contribution.⁴ ISMPP does not condone ghost writing or the use of ghostwriters.

References

1. ISMPP supports best practices and transparency in medical publications: better understanding of terms such as "ghostwriting" needed. [press release]. Briarcliff Manor, NY; Oct. 5, 2009.
2. Norris R, Bowman A, Fagan JM et al. International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP) position statement: the role of the professional medical writer. *Current Medical Research and Opinions*. 2007;23(8):1837-1840.
3. http://www.icmje.org/ethical_1author.html.
4. Laine C, Mulrow CD. Exorcising ghosts and unwelcome guests. *Annals of Internal Medicine*. 2005;143:611-612.