

Acknowledgment of Medical Writers in Medical Journal Articles: A Comparison from the Years 2000 and 2007

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Authorship and use of unacknowledged writers are important issues for journal editors, scientists, medical writers, and publication professionals.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study was to determine whether the acknowledgment of medical writers' contributions to papers published in medical journals has increased over time.

METHODS: Articles from 9 medical journals published during the years 2000 and 2007 were reviewed to determine whether the contributions of a medical writer were acknowledged. Other information retrieved included whether the article delineated the author(s)' specific contributions to the manuscript and the funding sources for the study.

RESULTS: A total of 581 articles were reviewed. Of the 334 articles reviewed that were published in 2000, 17 (5.1%) included an acknowledgment of a medical writer. Of the 247 articles reviewed that were published in 2007, 28 (11.3%) included an acknowledgment of a medical writer. The authors' specific contributions to the manuscripts were listed in 34.1% of the articles from the year 2000 and 59.1% of the articles from the year 2007. The frequency of acknowledgments of funding sources was similar for both years (62% and 61% for 2000 and 2007, respectively).

CONCLUSION: In the journals and timeframe studied, an overall 2-fold increase in the frequency of acknowledgments of medical writers was observed. More comprehensive research is needed to confirm these findings and to discern the reasons for the observed increase.

INTRODUCTION

Authorship-related issues have become prevalent in discussions about the integrity of research results published in medical and scientific journals. Numerous publications have addressed the use of unacknowledged authors (referred to as ghostwriting) and authorship criteria for publication, including the acknowledgment of professional medical writers.¹⁻⁶

Various organizations have developed statements that define the valued roles of professional medical writers and emphasize the importance of appropriately acknowledging their contributions to scientific publications.⁷⁻⁹

It is essential that the role of the medical writer be acknowledged in a publication.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the acknowledgment of medical writers' contributions to papers published in medical journals has increased over time.

METHODS

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)'s 2001 article on "Sponsorship, authorship, and accountability"⁶ was selected as an arbitrary reference point for comparing articles published before and after its publication date.

Articles published in the years 2000 and 2007 were selected from 9 medical journals:

- Annals of Internal Medicine (Ann Intern Med)
- Archives of Internal Medicine (Arch Intern Med)
- British Medical Journal (BMJ)
- Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)
- Croatian Medical Journal (Croat Med J)
- Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)
- Lancet
- New England Journal of Medicine (N Engl J Med)
- New Zealand Medical Journal (NZ Med J)

Medical journal article categories included

- Original Articles or Investigations
- Papers
- Research
- Research Letters
- Brief Reports
- Special Articles
- Review Articles
- Supplements
- Commentaries (in some issues)
- Case Reports
- Clinical Sciences
- Public Health
- Basic Sciences

Categories not included

- Letters to the Editor
- Editorials
- News sections

Definition of acknowledged medical writing

- Writing assistance or support
- Editorial assistance
- Preparation of the manuscript
- Assistance with preparation of the manuscript

Not considered medical writing

- Review of a manuscript
- Technical support
- Secretarial or administrative support

Information collected

- Name of the journal and the article's citation (issue date, volume number, page numbers, name of first author)
- Brief description of the acknowledgment (if provided)
 - Was medical writing support acknowledged?
 - If yes, specific wording of the acknowledgment
- Identification of funding support for the study and/or manuscript (eg, from a government agency, pharmaceutical company, society or association)
- Delineation of authors' specific contributions to the manuscripts

RESULTS

581 articles were reviewed
- 334 from the year 2000
- 247 from the year 2007

Table 1 shows the distribution of articles by medical journal, indicating how many acknowledged the contributions of a medical writer (also see Figure 1), identified the study's funding sources, and delineated the specific contributions of each author.

Overall 2-fold increase in frequency of acknowledgments of medical writers.

- 5.1% (17/334) in 2000 vs. 11.3% (28/247) in 2007
- Figure 2 illustrates how medical writing was acknowledged

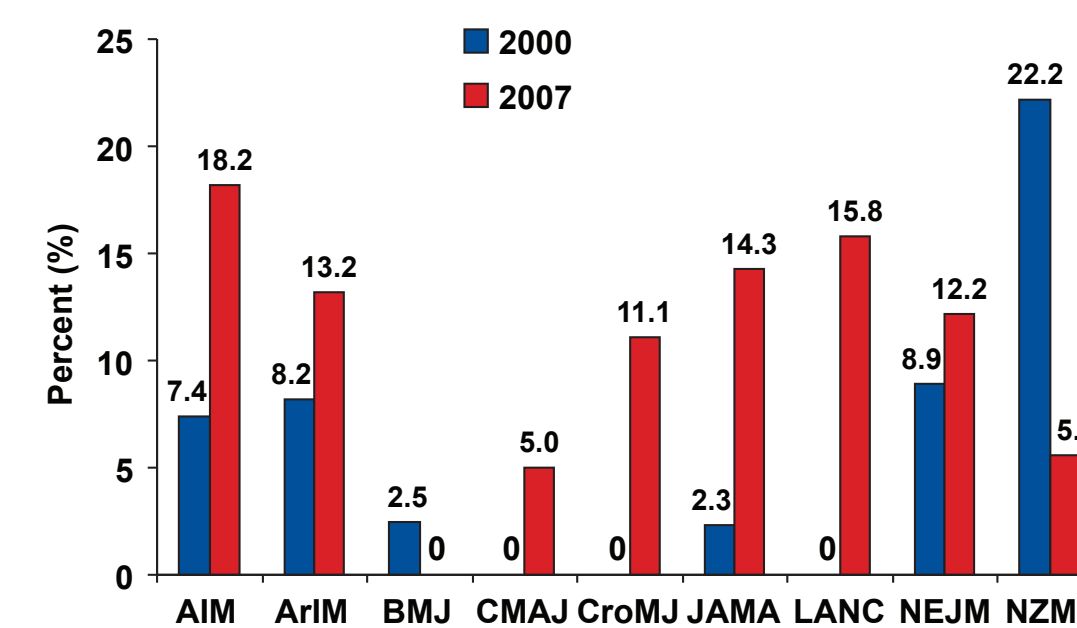
7 journals showed higher rates of medical writer acknowledgments in 2007 than in 2000 (Figure 1).

- Ann Intern Med
- Arch Intern Med
- CMAJ
- Croat Med J
- JAMA
- Lancet
- N Engl J Med

Table 1. Comparison of Articles by Medical Journal and Frequency of Medical Writer Acknowledgment, Funding Disclosure, and Author Contributions

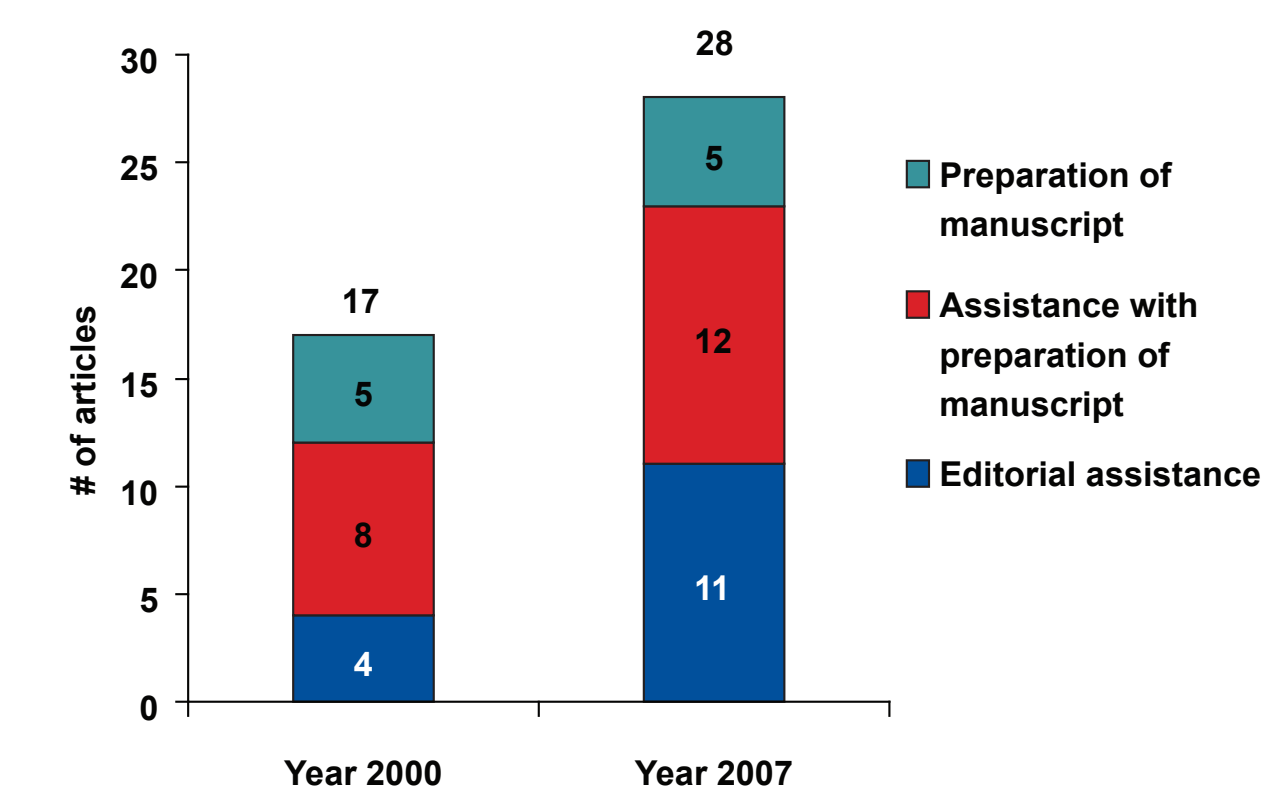
Journal	YEAR 2000 (June and December issues)				YEAR 2007 (January and December issues)			
	# Articles reviewed	# Articles that acknowledged a medical writer	# With funding disclosed	# With author contributions delineated	# Articles reviewed	# Articles that acknowledged a medical writer	# With funding disclosed	# With author contributions delineated
Ann Intern Med	27	2	19	20	22	4	14	15
Arch Intern Med	49	4	30	0	38	5	24	37
BMJ	40	1	24	36	24	0	20	23
CMAJ	27	0	9	13	20	1	9	14
Croat Med J	27	0	8	0	18	2	9	0
JAMA	44	1	32	5	28	4	5	28
Lancet	46	0	36	40	38	6	25	28
N Engl J Med	56	5	41	0	41	5	35	0
NZ Med J	18	4	7	0	18	1	10	1
TOTAL	334	17	206	114	247	28	151	146

Figure 1. Frequency of Medical Writer Acknowledgment by Journal and Year



AIM=Annals of Internal Medicine; ArIM=Archives of Internal Medicine; BMJ=British Medical Journal; CMAJ=Canadian Medical Association Journal; CroMJ=Croatian Medical Journal; JAMA=Journal of the American Medical Association; LANC=Lancet; NEJM=New England Journal of Medicine; NZMJ=New Zealand Medical Journal

Figure 2. Description of Medical Writer Acknowledgment



CONCLUSIONS

Results from this study suggest that the acknowledgment of medical writers in medical journal articles is increasing.

Reasons for increase are uncertain.

- Medical writers may have been used more often in 2007 than in 2000, and thus were acknowledged more frequently.
- Changes in authors' guidelines for medical journals from the years 2000 to 2007 need to be considered in the context of this study's findings.

More research is warranted to confirm the findings from this study.

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*Author Disclosure

The author notes that she was employed as a medical writer by Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, which was acquired by Pfizer Inc. in October 2009. The paper was written by the author without content analysis or editorial assistance from Wyeth Pharmaceuticals or Pfizer Inc. It represents the author's independent analysis and is in no way attributable to Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, Pfizer Inc., or any of their affiliates.