

# Open Medicine's ghost and guest authorship policy

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**G**HOST AUTHORSHIP OCCURS WHEN SOMEONE MAKES a significant contribution to a manuscript without due acknowledgement of their role. Guest authorship, in contrast, occurs when an individual is named as an author of a manuscript when they do not meet authorship criteria. Both are disturbingly common.<sup>1</sup>

The preliminary results of a recent survey of corresponding authors conducted by the editorial staff of *JAMA* found that over one-quarter of articles published in six major general medical journals in 2008 had guest authors (range by journal: 16%–39%) and nearly 10% had ghost authors (range by journal: 2%–11%).<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of guest authors and ghost authors was highest in *Nature Medicine* (39%) and *New England Journal of Medicine* (11%) respectively.

Ghost and guest authorship are breaches of professional ethics. They violate readers' trust in scientific reporting and have the potential to distort medical literature. Editors and readers of medical journals need to be confident that all listed authors have indeed made substantial contributions and that no major contributors have gone unnamed.<sup>2</sup> Transparent and complete identification of contributors to research publication is essential to scientific integrity.

This is particularly important in the context of manuscripts reporting on pharmaceutical trials with potential economic ramifications, since significant problems related to the use of ghost authorship have been reported in this area.<sup>3</sup> In the most pernicious examples, ghost authors, who may include professional writers, researchers and statisticians, are directly or indirectly employed by a pharmaceutical or medical device company to write a research protocol and manuscript, and a guest author who is respected in the field of research is paid to append his or her name to the manuscript and submit it to a medical journal for publication.<sup>4</sup>

*Open Medicine*, like other medical journals, has instituted a ghost and guest authorship policy to promote ethical authorship practices. A key feature of our policy is the requirement that authors provide a contributor statement describing the specific contribution of each author and stating how each author meets the authorship criteria of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), which *Open Medicine* endorses.<sup>5</sup>

*Open Medicine* recognizes that professional medical writers make legitimate contributions to research publication and advocates for the routine and transparent disclosure of any and all professional writer involvement in manuscript preparation. The Journal's policy states that professional medical writers whose contribution to a manuscript qualifies them as an author according to the ICMJE criteria must be listed as authors, with their affiliations and competing interests provided and their funding source named. Professional medical writers whose contribution does not qualify them for authorship according to the ICMJE criteria should be named in the Acknowledgements section, with their contribution clearly described and their funding source named. Authors who have used the services of a medical writer and are unclear how those services should be defined are asked to contact the *Open Medicine* editors to obtain clarification as to the appropriate place in the manuscript to acknowledge and describe their contribution. We have included in our author guidelines a checklist adapted from Götzsche et al.<sup>6</sup> to help submitting authors in the appropriate disclosure of writing assistance.

As with other significant breaches of scientific conduct, articles found to have ghost or guest authors will be retracted by *Open Medicine*. In accordance with World Association of Medical Editors guidelines,<sup>2</sup> the editors of *Open Medicine* will also inform the authors' institutions of the breach and ban further contributions by these authors to the Journal; publish a notice on the Journal's website that a manuscript used ghost or guest authors, along with the names of the responsible companies (if relevant) and the authors; provide the names of those involved if contacted by the media or government organizations; and share their experiences with other journal editors.

*Open Medicine* strongly believes in transparent reporting. Ghost and guest authorship are dishonest, and the Journal editors intend to maintain processes that improve public accountability and the credibility of scientific research reporting. We welcome feedback on our policy and suggestions on how we can work toward improving the integrity of medical publishing.

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