Increasing the trust in scientific authorship†

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The system of scientific authorship is based on trust. Journal editors, reviewers and readers expect that a paper’s content reflects the opinions of the authors and all the available data. Recently, there has been concern that this trust may be undermined by the involvement of industry-paid writers in the preparation of publications (Bodenheimer, 2000). These professional writers are either employed directly by pharmaceutical companies or work for medical communications agencies; their contribution to a paper varies, but may include writing the first draft of a manuscript for the authors to revise or editing a paper written by the authors (Lagnado, 2003). Despite much discussion about the merits of industry-funded writing assistance, there has been little research into its effects on the biomedical literature.

THE EFFECT OF PROFESSIONAL WRITERS ON AUTHORSHIP

Healy & Cattell (2003, this issue) set out to assess the effects of a US-based medical communications agency on authorship practices and the therapeutics literature. They used Medline and EMBASE to search for articles about the therapeutic effects of sertraline for the period 1998 to 2000. Then they compared sertraline publications coordinated by the agency with publications that had no agency involvement. They found that 55 published papers had been coordinated by the agency, compared with 41 that had not. The agency-coordinated papers were, on average, cited more frequently in the literature, published in journals with a higher impact factor and authored by academics with more Medline-listed publications.

The study has several important weaknesses that make it difficult to assess the effect of the agency on authorship. First, publications on only one drug were assessed over a short period, limiting the generalisability of the results. Second, Healy & Cattell’s work lacks information about publications in journals not listed on Medline or EMBASE. Although such journals may be inferior in terms of methodological and reporting quality, they may be more readable and relevant to clinical practice than are peer-reviewed journals (Rochon et al., 2002). Third, and most importantly, for both series of papers we do not know the extent of the authors’ contributions to the analysis and interpretation of data and the final version of the manuscript.

Nevertheless, Healy & Cattell’s work will fuel the debate about the involvement of industry-paid writers in the reporting of research. To date, this debate has been based almost exclusively on anecdote and opinion. Critics of industry-funded writing assistance argue that it might undermine accountability and bias the paper’s content (Bodenheimer, 2000). Others claim that industry-paid writers in the reporting of research, but we should treat this idea with caution. Although the agency-coordinated papers were cited more frequently, citation rates are an imperfect method for assessing the positive impact of a paper on the literature because some citations may refute or criticise a paper rather than support its content. Furthermore, citation rates can be influenced by a number of factors intrinsic to the paper, such as its newsworthiness and the quality of the research (Callaham et al., 2002).

Increasing the trust in scientific authorship is based on high-quality research (Lagnado, 2002). Although Healy & Cattell’s study lacks a formal qualitative assessment of the two series of papers, they state that the agency-coordinated papers contained a much higher proportion of randomised controlled trials, conventionally seen as the highest-quality research. This may, at least in part, account for the difference in impact between the two sets of papers. Other factors that could contribute to the higher citation rate among agency-coordinated papers are greater awareness of these papers through reprints and higher self-citation by the authors, who on average had published more extensively than the authors of the non-agency-coordinated papers.

CENSORSHIP OR TRANSPARENCY?

Given the uncertainty about the effects of industry-funded writing assistance, how should it be handled? There are two prevailing views. Some commentators recommend banning such assistance, insisting that authors write every word of a paper (DeBakey & DeBakey, 1995). In an ideal world, industry-funded writing assistance would be unnecessary. All researchers who wanted to publish in high-impact international journals would be fluent in English, be able to prepare manuscripts in a timely manner and have good writing skills. Ideals and reality do not always coincide (Albert, 1998; Weeks & Wallace, 2002). Moreover, attempts to prohibit industry-paid writing assistance would simply drive it underground (Lagnado, 2002). Therefore, others recommend a more pragmatic approach, arguing that rather than banning writing assistance we should encourage good practice, whereby authors determine and retain responsibility for the paper’s content and the professional writer’s contribution, if significant, is disclosed (Planagin & Rennie, 1995).

Greater transparency seems to be the preferable route. However, Healy & Cattell found that only two of the 55 papers coordinated by the writing agency acknowledged writing support. Several reasons may account for this low rate of disclosure. The authors may have judged that the agency coordination was not sufficiently important to merit an acknowledgement. Alternatively, authors may have been unaware that significant writing assistance should have been disclosed. Also, authors may have been concerned that disclosing such assistance would reduce the chances of their papers being accepted by journals (Lagnado, 2002). This latter explanation

†See pp. 22–27, this issue.
could be remedied by journal editors giving
an assurance that papers will be judged on
their scientific content rather than whether
they were developed with the assistance of
a professional writer.

WHAT NEXT?

Recently, journal editors, academics and
industry have proposed several initiatives
with the aim of improving authorship prac-
tices. Rennie et al (2000) have championed
the concept of contributorship. This
requires that authors, as well as those
acknowledged but not listed in the byline,
describe their specific contributions to the
research and the manuscript. Healy &
Cattell call for the raw data or primary data
tables from industry-funded therapeutic
trials to be made available to authors, a
view echoed in the revised International
Committee of Medical Journal Editors’ re-
minder on publication ethics (Davidoff
et al, 2001) and, in June 2002, the Phar-
maeutical Research and Manufacturers of
America published guidelines, Principles
on Conduct of Clinical Trials and Commu-
nication of Clinical Trial Results. Although
this document falls short of recommending
that investigators have automatic access to
all the raw data, it makes several key state-
ments about authorship. First, sponsors
should not interfere with investigators’
independence, ensuring ‘an objective and
balanced interpretation of trial results’. Sec-
ond, to qualify for authorship, investi-
gators must make a substantial con-
tribution to the research as well as
participate in the writing or revising of the
manuscript. Third, the role of individuals
employed by sponsors to assist with manu-
scripts should be disclosed. These principles
became effective on 1 October 2002.

However, a fundamental shift in
authorship practices cannot be achieved by
focusing exclusively on industry. Bhopal
et al (1997) discovered that many
academics and researchers at a university
faculty were unaware of authorship guide-
lines, disagreed with them or ignored them.
Perhaps most troublesome was the finding
that interviewees thought it common prac-
tice for individuals who had contributed
little or nothing to the research or the
manuscript to be listed as authors – a prac-
tice called gift authorship. Support for this
perception has come from a recent study
(Mowatt et al, 2002), which showed that
39% of Cochrane reviews had evidence of
gift authorship. In addition, Mowatt et al
(2002) found that more than one in five
authors had not participated in the drafting
or revising of the review. The message from
these studies is clear: to improve the trust in
scientific authorship, academic medicine
will also have to look at its behaviour.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Max Lagnado has been an employee of
Pharmacia and in recent years has been a
consultant and professional writer for the
pharmaceutical industry, assisting investi-
gators to publish industry-funded research.
He has never worked for Pfizer, the manu-
facturer of sertraline.

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