Banishing the Ghost: Examining the Role of Science Writers

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Going beyond the scope of its title, “Banishing the Ghost: Examining the Role of Science Writers” examined general concepts of authorship of scientific articles.

Annette Flanagin showed a graph indicating an increase from 1966 to 2009 in the number of articles published about authorship. She then summarized the results of her and her colleagues’ research on the prevalence of honorary and ghost authors among leading medical journals. Flanagin defined ghost authors as those who contributed to a manuscript but are not given credit (for example, a medical writer who wrote the first draft of a manuscript). honorary authors are those who are listed as authors but did not meet authorship criteria as defined by International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) guidelines (for example, a department head who did not contribute to the project). Flanagin and her colleagues found that the prevalence of ghost authorship had decreased slightly but significantly in recent years but that there was little change in the prevalence of honorary authorship.

An audience member asked why there was a change in ghost authorship, and Flanagin replied that it might be due to increased awareness and guidance from journal editors and professional societies of editors and scientific writers.

Whereas Flanagin spoke of ghost authors and honorary authors, Devora Krischer used the terms ghostwriters and ghost authors. She described ghostwriters as being similar to Flanagin’s ghost authors. Krischer’s definition of a ghost author is a listed author who did not really contribute (similar to Flanagin’s honorary author).

Krischer focused on acknowledgment sections and their potential use in making contributions to an article clear. All those who contributed to the manuscript but who do not meet authorship criteria should be listed in the acknowledgments, she said, and, just like authors, those acknowledged must note conflicts of interest and give written permission to be named. By providing examples of acknowledgment sections, Krischer showed that there are many ways to present the information, from flowery (such as “the authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance . . .”) to simple (such as “John Doe did X; Jane Smith did Y”).

Audience members asked what to do if an author of the paper had no knowledge of having been included and whether acknowledgment sections are still too vague, inasmuch as such phrases as “assisted with the statistics” or “edited the manuscript” can be interpreted in many ways.

Patricia K Baskin, executive editor of Neurology, outlined some of her journal’s strategies for increasing transparency in authorship. She explained that she and her colleagues believe that anyone who makes a substantial intellectual contribution should be considered an author of the paper, in that ghostwritten articles can obscure conflicts of interest. Her goal? Full disclosure.

Therefore, Neurology does not follow ICMJE guidelines about authorship, which require all authors to make “substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data”, to “draft the article or revise it critically for important intellectual content”, and to approve the final article. Instead of asking who deserves to be an author, editors should ask who influenced the content, she said. An author can qualify for authorship by making “substantial contributions to design or conception or analysis or interpretation of data or drafting the article or revising it critically for intellectual content.” For each revision of the manuscript, authors take responsibility for the section to which they actually contributed. If they don’t fulfill these criteria, they are listed in a contributors appendix.

Neurology staff check the acknowledgment section to make sure that medical writers don’t need to be listed as authors. If they are listed as having assisted in manuscript preparation, the corresponding author is asked to explain their participation and to make them authors if they fit Neurology’s criteria.

Baskin made her opinion clear: “If you made a substantial intellectual contribution, including drafting the original manuscript or responding substantively to the reviewers’ comments, we want you to be an author.”