



## **A Ghostly Reply: a Member Replies to "A Ghostly Crew"** (THE LANCET 1998; 351: 1741)

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**by Liz Wager**

As a professional ghost, I want to respond to David Sharp's comments<sup>1</sup>. First, I agree that it is unacceptable to expect anyone to put their name to a review to which they have contributed nothing. But the remedy is simple: doctors have only to say no. However, I disagree strongly with his comments about the role of professional writers in clinical-trial publications.

His objections to ghostwriters seem to be based on the outmoded principle that whoever makes the first marks on the paper is, by definition, a study's author. I do not accept that seeking help from a professional writer "goes against the spirit of author responsibility", when it is perfectly acceptable to seek help from statisticians &c. Your two references show the failure of the current authorship system and the need for systems in which credit is not given only for writing the paper<sup>2,3</sup>. Richard Horton's March 7 commentary<sup>2</sup> and Rennie and colleagues<sup>3</sup> acknowledge that research usually involves many people. They propose that one or two should act as guarantors, taking responsibility for a project's overall integrity. Yet nowhere do they say that guarantors must necessarily write the first draft, just as they do not necessarily perform every power calculation or clinical measurement. The move towards contributors, as proposed by Rennie and co-workers (and adopted by some journals, including *The Lancet*), should encourage openness, and I agree that help with writing should be acknowledged. However, traditional acknowledgements to individuals for help in preparing manuscripts do not reveal whether their contribution was typing or substantial editing, nor who paid their salary or fee.

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You are concerned that studies' sponsors will have a chance to comment before external investigators. This approach implies that such investigators are unable to detect bias in the presentation of results and ignores the fact that the most important review is surely the final one, not the first. Therefore, I cannot accept David Sharp's distinction between "legitimacy" of authors' editors and that of professional medical writers. The only difference between them is that authors' editors rework draft manuscripts prepared by someone else, whereas ghostwriters prepare first drafts and then incorporate contributors' changes. Authors' editors may substantially rework papers and investigators may completely rewrite ghosted drafts so the net effect is exactly the same—the only difference is the order of the work.

Finally, in the era of evidence-based everything, does *The Lancet* have any evidence that the use of professional medical writers causes harm? In my experience, professional writers speed up the writing process and improve the quality of the final paper. Instead of criticising the ghosts, journal editors and sponsoring companies should work together to draw up guidelines of acceptable practice.

1. Sharp D. A ghostly crew. *Lancet* 1998; 351: 1076.
2. Horton R. The unmasked carnival of science. *Lancet* 1998; 351: 688-89.
3. Rennie D, Yank V, Emanuel L. When authorship fails: a proposal to make contributors accountable. *JAMA* 1997; 278: 579-85.

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