



## **Ethics in Medical Writing**

by Debra Landry

We all speak of ethics in medicine. The ethics of a doctor helping with euthanasia or compassionate suicide is still highly controversial in our society. There are fanatical, so-called *right to lifers* who are willing to burn down buildings and even kill to make their point against the taking of unwanted life. How do we decide about the right to remove organs from accident victims or anencephalic babies? Does religion or personal belief regard the use of organs from a deceased elderly patient to save the life of a young mother of four or a child as sacrilegious? The rich and wealthy like the Prince of Thurn and Taxis can afford three heart transplants at the age of over 70 to extend his life by one to two years at the very most, while at the same time we shut down inner-city hospitals because they do not make enough profit. We have political correctness and ethics in politics – sort of. Anyway we talk about it a lot. We supposedly have ethics in consumer protection. We are familiar with the ethics in the pharmaceutical industry and the auto makers, but what about the cigarette industry or the gun manufacturers?

These and other questions are topical because they affect everybody. But what are ethics in medical writing? Is it plagiarism if the ghostwriter agrees to remain unacknowledged or, more specifically, is getting paid good money to keep behind the scenes? This is the authorized use of the language and thoughts of another, while representing them as one's own original work. Some people feel that it does not matter whether the ghost agrees to the deal for it to be inappropriate. Then there was the recent firing of the two medical journal editors (JAMA and N Engl J Med) for following their own convictions even when they were in conflict with their parent journals. Finally there are even ethical dilemmas when reporting medical results. For example, should we be allowed to use the results of Nazi experiments obtained on concentration camp victims if they help advance medicine for mankind?

---

***Should I manipulate a piece to make it impossible to recognize the product or the company involved to apply to get the next job?***

---

I was confronted with my own personal ethical question when I was requested to supply samples of my work to make an offer. I have secrecy agreements with nearly all of my customers and, even when I do not, everything in my office is normally treated with the utmost confidentiality. Discretion is part of the business. Should I manipulate a piece of work I wrote to make it impossible to recognise the product or the company involved to get the next job? May I even do that? Would I want my subcontractor to take my work or the work of my clients and do the same? My answer to myself was a resounding no! Sometimes you have to rely on your own gut

### **Ethics in Medical Writing**

feelings. And if I alter my piece to make it untraceable, does it even sound good or read well in the end? Hence, I would be spending a great deal of time doing something that in my heart feels at least partly wrong. Ultimately, I might even be defeating my own purpose in trying to give somebody a good impression of my work. Too many changes and the whole process would eventually no longer make any sense.

Authorship has long been an extremely contentious subject and seems lately to be coming to a boil. Who really writes anything all by themselves? Does the proofreader get acknowledged? Are the typist and the printer mentioned? Is the bartender who listened to your problems and gave you a good idea named? Where do we draw the line? Do we go by percentages? How about setting the cut-off limit for a major contribution at around 10 – 30% (and of course, how to quantify it?). If somebody contributes that much, they should get credit for it by being mentioned. The question is how, where? Should that person be considered a main author or just worthy of an acknowledgement at the end.

What about the practice of listing as many as 15 authors or more on a publication? To me that is as ridiculous as the questionable practice of being forced to include the head of a department's name in the list of authors just because he or she is the boss. To be ethical about acknowledging true contributions shouldn't be a difficult task but it often is. I think we can and do recognize plagiarism and nondisclosure when we see it,

---

***Ghostwriters are bound by the code of silence. We are often paid to keep our mouths shut. But why should the others not know?***

---

but since we don't see it most of the time, does it really matter then?

Ghostwriters are bound by the code of silence. We are often paid to keep our mouths shut. But why should the others not know? Does the purported author lose face or money if the public is aware of the contribution of a

ghostwriter? Do their colleagues think less of them? Worst of all, even if the science is excellent, would the editor reject a paper if a ghostwriter was responsible for putting it all together? What are the moral consequences of the non-disclosing of the authors' actions?

I do not feel that celebrity authors who write their autobiographies are fooling anyone when they publish their life's story as if they had written it themselves. The conjoiner "as told to," or collaboration between a famous person and the true writer is a very common practice, but does it really make any difference? It is someone else's story, and the person who is actually *writing* it doesn't get much, if any, of the credit, and probably shouldn't. Well, you might argue, he did get mentioned. Thus it would appear that ethics in medical writing are case-sensitive, but isn't that what ethics and professional morals are all about in the first place?

I think the best answer is to blame the system and society. I indeed wonder whether we are not actually speaking more about hypocrisy than about ethics. Why is it necessary to reveal everything? Your mother allowed (or even forced) you to tell that little white lie when asked if Auntie Gertrud's outrageously flowered ill-fitting dress looked nice or not. "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all," mine taught me. But when asked and I told the (not always flattering) truth, I was then labeled a naughty girl. "But Mother, you told me I shouldn't lie!"

The Supreme Court Justices can justify opinions about pornography with "I'll know it when I see it," but how do we know it when we don't see it. What it boils down to is common sense. I think that is why US president Bill Clinton was not crucified after all, but rather morally exonerated in principle for his failings instead, as portentous as they may have been. Obviously, everybody does breach moral principles and standards in some form or another. Who has not at least been tempted by, if not succumbed to, the seductive wiles of the opposite sex (or of the same, for that matter). The mere thought of doing something, of course, is not the same as acting. But the understanding of how and what is right or wrong is too often contradictory to simple and basic human nature and therefore crosses the line to the point where white lies are accepted. Of course WRONG is WRONG, but wrong is frequently not considered unethical. Is this because we have written the wrong moral code, or are trying to maintain an outdated set of norms and values? Yes, I would say.

---

***The understanding of what is right or wrong is too often contradictory to simple and basic human nature and therefore crosses the line to the point where white-lies are accepted***

How far should we push up the bar of ethical standards beyond common sense, criminalizing common behaviour, or should we reassess our system of norms and values? If the system was honest with itself, we would not have nearly as much trouble with this topic because it would be allowed and acceptable to have medical writers do the bulk of the composing (and even thinking) and to have it openly acknowledged. The original idea and the basic gist are what got the medical writer started in the first place, so maybe they are just the lackies without any originality, whilst the scientists or doctors delegate the task, in the same manner that they delegate tasks to their lab assistants or scrub nurses – or Rodin or Rembrandt their art to apprentices. Are we being honest in expecting full disclosure in the acknowledgements and due credit paid to all of the real contributors, especially the medical ghostwriter?

Every politician is supported by advisers and speech writers. Lincoln purportedly wrote his Gettysburg Address all by himself, but those were the good old days. Nobody believes that Clinton's or Schröder's or any other politician's speeches are penned solely by their own hand.

Personally, I am glad that so many scientists cannot write that well themselves or just do not have the time. Otherwise, I might be out of a job. On the other hand, if there was no market for unacknowledged writers and language editors, I would not have had an alternative and would have been forced to try to be brave and bohemian enough to live in an attic and write the Great American Novel instead of bowing to forces of consumerism and pursue material, rather than nonmaterial happiness.

Do ghostwriters lack integrity because they take money and do not force the client to acknowledge them in some official way? Would it not be rather stupid or be taking too large a risk if they tried to insist that such disclosure become a stipulation in the contract? The consequence would be to sacrifice the money they could earn if the "ethical" demand was refused. Would a stipulation dictating that the medical writer must be mentioned suffice, or is just the suggestion that they should be mentioned enough?

### ***Ethics in Medical Writing***

Perhaps the world of academics, writers, and publishers should finally admit that many people contribute to a written piece of work, be it a scientific publication, a speech or lecture, an autobiography or a great earth-shattering novel. The fraud, if there is one, is in one's own heart.

Perhaps the solution lies in finding a more equitable and realistic method of giving credit on a publication. One could structure the acknowledgements similar to the way nutrition facts are presented on food labels. The contributors would be listed in the order of the percentage of the author's contribution, although determining the relative percentages might be difficult. Another possibility which is frequently discussed and which would avoid such problems would be to present publication authorship like the credits on a movie or a record label, clearly identifying each role and the person who performed it. If such a system were to become an accepted norm, nobody would have to hide anything that is common knowledge anyway, and we would eliminate the ethical problems surrounding the issue of nondisclosure.

We can start by raising awareness about this matter. Further study is needed to clarify the ethics and proportionality of contributions to medical writing. So, to any of you who want to write a follow-up article, can I be a co-author?

Debra Landry  
Landry and Associates International  
Postfach 2604  
D-37016 Göttingen  
Tel: (+49) 551 63766  
Fax (+49) 551 63776  
E-mail : LandryInt@aol.com