



## **Ethics in Medical Writing**

by Deborah 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. How do we decide about the right to remove organs from accident victims or anencephalic babies? Wealthy elderly patients can afford multiple heart transplants to extend their lives 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.

These and other questions are topical because they affect everybody. But what about ethics in medical writing? Is it plagiarism if the ghostwriter agrees to remain unacknowledged? 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.

What about 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? Or potential 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?

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 had written to make it impossible to recognize 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! And if I alter my piece to make it untraceable, does it even sound good or read well in the end? Ultimately, by making such changes, 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. Sometimes you have to rely on your own gut feelings about what is appropriate.

---

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

---

Authorship has long been an extremely contentious subject and seems lately to be coming to a boil. Who really writes anything without any assistance? Does the proofreader get acknowledged? Where do we draw the line? 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, but since we don't see it most of the time, does it really matter?

Ghostwriters are bound by the code of silence and it is often in the contract to keep our mouths shut. But why should 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? If the science is excellent, would an editor reject a paper if a ghostwriter was responsible for putting it all together? What are the moral consequences of the non-disclosure of the authors' actions?

---

***Ghostwriters are bound by the code of silence, but why should others not know?***

---

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 a 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. But at least they get mentioned. Thus it would appear that ethics in medical writing are situation dependent, but isn't that what ethics and professional morals are all about in the first place?

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? 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 solution may lie in finding a more equitable and realistic method of giving credit on a publication. One could structure the acknowledgements similar to the way nutritional 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 that 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, no one would have to hide anything that is common knowledge anyway, and we would eliminate the ethical problems surrounding the issue of nondisclosure.

Personally, I am glad that so many scientists cannot write well themselves or just do not have the time. However, we as medical writers, should begin to raise awareness about this matter. Further discussion 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?

Deborah Landry  
Landry and Associates International  
Postfach 2604, Germany  
Tel: (+49) 551 63766 Fax (+49) 551 63776  
E-mail : LandryInt@aol.com