



Submission for updating the Medicines Australia Code of Conduct

To: The Medicines Australia Code of Conduct Committee
From: ProScribe Medical Communications (www.proscribe.com.au)
Date: August 23, 2013
Issue: Change wording for Section 11. Ghost Writing

We commend Medicines Australia for including a warning against ghost writing in Section 11 of the 17th edition of the Medicines Australia Code of Conduct (effective 11 January 2013). Unfortunately, the text used in the Code could be misinterpreted. We encourage the Code Committee to revise the text in the 18th edition of the Code. Our suggested revisions are:

Original text

11. Ghost Writing

Ghost writing describes conduct where the contributions of professional medical writers are not identified or acknowledged in a publication, either in the authorship line or other acknowledgement of contribution. To ensure transparency of authorship or contribution to a publication, companies' should follow the principles described in the IFPMA *Joint Position on the Publication of Clinical Trial Results in the Scientific Literature* (2010).

Revised text

11. Ghost Writing

Ghost writing describes inappropriate conduct where the contribution of a writer is not acknowledged in a publication. In contrast to ghost writers, professional medical writers disclose their involvement and funding source and follow ethical publication guidelines. Assistance from professional medical writers is acceptable; assistance from ghost writers is not. To ensure transparency of authorship or contribution to a publication, companies should follow the principles described in the IFPMA *Joint Position on the Publication of Clinical Trial Results in the Scientific Literature* (2010).

Explanatory Notes

11. Professional medical writers should not be confused with ghost writers. Medical journal editors condemn ghost writing, but have recognised that professional medical writers can provide valuable and legitimate contributions to manuscripts. Undisclosed contributions to the writing of research publications are defined as ghost writing if they do not merit authorship and are not listed in the acknowledgements. Undisclosed contributions to the writing of research publications are defined as ghost authoring if they do merit authorship and are not listed in the author byline. Both ghost writing and ghost authoring are unethical publication practices.

Rationale

International medical journal editors, academic institutions, pharmaceutical companies, and professional medical writing associations condemn ghost writing, but recognise that professional medical writers can make ethical and legitimate contributions to publications [1-6].

The original wording in the Code does not differentiate between professional medical writing (acceptable) and ghost writing (unacceptable). Ghost writing is not the same as professional medical writing. The original wording in the Code implies that professional medical writers ghost write; if they behaved this way, they would be ghost writers, not professional medical writers. Further, the original wording in the Code implies that ghost writers may be entitled to authorship; in this case, they would be ghost authors, not ghost writers. We recognise that the terminology differences may appear subtle or confusing, but that is why we encourage the Code Committee to be explicit and accurate in the descriptions used for these different writing practices.

Expertise

ProScribe Medical Communications (est. 2000; Australia, China, Japan) is internationally recognised for conducting and publishing research on ethical publication practices.



ProScribe's PhD- and MD-qualified medical writers are active members of international associations that advocate for ethical medical writing practices and condemn ghostwriting. ProScribe staff developed and published the "anti-ghostwriting" checklist [3], published the first paper differentiating ghost writers from professional medical writers [7], and conducted the first systematic review on the prevalence of ghost writing in the medical literature [8]. ProScribe was the first medical communications company in the Asia-Pacific region to employ Certified Medical Publication Professionals (ie, staff who have passed an international exam on 150 topics related to ethical medical writing practices).

References

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