

The Legitimacy of Hiring Professional Medical Writers: Balancing Ethics and Scientific Progress

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The pursuit of scientific knowledge and the dissemination of research findings are at the core of the scientific endeavor and scientific writing is the most crucial means of communicating scientific work.¹ In the realm of medicine and healthcare, where the stakes are often human lives and well-being, the importance of effectively communicating research findings cannot be overstated.² Biomedical research holds the key to understanding and addressing health issues, diseases, and their management, ultimately benefiting society as a whole.³ However, the research cycle is incomplete without the dissemination of its findings, making publication a critical step. Since the introduction of Evidence Based Medicine, number of scientific articles published per year have increased steadily with a rough estimation of 2 million articles per year globally.⁴ Incomplete, inaccurate or delayed reporting of medical research may reduce the efficiency and quality of health care. Therefore scientific and clinical research should be reported in a complete, accurate balanced and timely manner.⁵

Despite the undeniable significance of publishing biomedical research, many clinicians and academic scientists face challenges that hinder their ability to effectively communicate their work.⁶ Several factors contribute to this reluctance, including; lack of time, inadequate writing skills, language barriers, limited resources and ethical concerns. They often have demanding schedules that leave them with limited time for writing and publishing research papers and thus balancing with patient care, teaching responsibilities, and laboratory work can be overwhelming. Secondly, proficiency in scientific writing is not present inherently in everyone, they may excel in their respective field but may find difficult to convey their findings effectively through writing as the complex scientific ideas require a precise articulation. In an increasingly globalized world of research, language can be a significant barrier, where a non-native English speakers may find it challenging to write in English which is the dominant language of scientific communication.

In light of these challenges, the need for professional medical

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writers becomes evident. Professional medical writers are individuals with specialized training and expertise in scientific and medical writing. They play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between research and publication as they possess in-depth knowledge of scientific writing conventions, ensuring that research findings are communicated accurately and effectively. They can distill complex information into clear and concise language. By outsourcing the writing process to professionals, researchers can focus on their core duties, such as conducting experiments, analyzing data, and patient care. This not only saves time but also enhances productivity. They can help researchers overcome language barriers and publish in internationally recognized journals. Ethical considerations are paramount in scientific research and they can assist researchers in adhering to ethical guidelines and addressing conflicts of interest transparently. With their knowledge of the publication landscape, professional medical writers can guide researchers in selecting the most suitable journals for their work. They are well-versed in journal submission processes and can improve the chances of acceptance. While the benefits of professional medical writers are evident, it is essential to consider the availability of these services and raise awareness among researchers about their significance. The contemporary era of scientific research demands greater access to professional medical writing support. There should be mechanisms in place to ensure the competence and ethical standards of professional medical writers. Certification programs and professional organizations can play a role in setting industry standards.

In the ever-evolving landscape of medical research and publication, the question of whether it is legitimate to hire a professional medical writer has garnered significant attention. This debate centers on the ethical considerations surrounding the involvement of third-party writers in the scientific process and the potential impact on research integrity. While concerns about transparency and authorship have been raised, it is essential to delve into this complex issue, weighing the benefits and challenges of employing professional medical writers. The ethical dilemma surrounding the legitimacy of hiring professional medical writers centers on several key issues:

1. Transparency and authorship: Involvement of third-party writers may obscure the true contributions of

authors, potentially compromising transparency and authorship integrity. A high prevalence of authorship problems can have a severe impact on the integrity of the research process.⁷

2. Conflict of interest: When a pharmaceutical company or industry-sponsored research engage medical writers, the fear is that these writers may prioritize corporate interests over scientific objectivity.⁸ The term 'ghost writer' or 'ghost author' refers to a person who has prepared or contributed significantly in writing an article but his name is not included in the authors list.⁹
3. Undermining researcher skills: Relying on professional medical writers may discourage researchers from improving their scientific writing and communication skills and over time it could lead to a dependency on external writers.
4. Financial considerations: The cost of hiring professional medical writers can be significant, leading to concerns about the unequal access to such services and potential financial bias in research.

While the ethical concerns surrounding the use of professional medical writers are valid, it is equally important to consider the practical benefits that these writers bring to the scientific community including; enhanced research communication, quality assurance, overcoming language barriers, time efficiency and regulatory compliance. Although ghostwriting is considered as a serious issue with marked impact on public health but the real extent of this problem is still unclear.^{10,11} To address the ethical concerns associated with hiring professional medical writers, several strategies can be implemented:

1. Transparency: Researchers should be transparent about the contributions of medical writers in their publications. This includes explicitly acknowledging their roles in manuscript preparation and providing details in the acknowledgments section.
2. Authorship guidelines: Medical journals should establish clear authorship guidelines that emphasize the importance of transparency in acknowledging the contributions of all individuals involved in the research and writing process.
3. Declaration of conflicts of interest: Researchers and institutions should disclose any potential conflicts of interest related to the involvement of medical writers, particularly in industry-sponsored research.
4. Training and education: Institutions should provide training and resources to help researchers improve their scientific writing skills, reducing the need for external writers.
5. Regulatory oversight: Regulatory agencies should ensure that pharmaceutical companies and research institutions adhere to ethical and transparency standards when engaging medical writers in the preparation of regulatory documents.

To conclude, the debate over the legitimacy of hiring professional medical writers is multifaceted, with valid ethical concerns on one side and practical benefits on the other. Striking the right balance between transparency and

the need for expertise in scientific communication is crucial. It is not inherently illegitimate to hire professional medical writers; instead, it is essential to ensure that their roles are clearly defined, transparently acknowledged, and ethically conducted. Researchers, institutions, and journals must work together to establish and uphold ethical standards that address the concerns associated with their involvement.

Authors Contribution:

Iqbal Hussain Udaipurwala: Conception, writing, literature search, proof reading

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