

Description

Ghost authors — individuals that make a large contribution to a research article but are not listed as an author — appear to be common in large clinical trials. These clinical trials are instrumental in testing medical treatments before their approval by the regulating authority. Therefore, they need to be accurate, reproducible and above all transparent.

Researchers publish their work as a team-effort. The first author does most of the research work, followed by colleagues who worked on the project in descending order of contribution. The last author is usually the supervisor of the research project. Journals have guidelines for authorship to ensure everyone listed as an author is due their credit. On the other hand, authors of papers take responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the published data.

Clinical Trial Validity

Having all the authors listed in an article is important, especially amidst the current reproducibility crisis. Alarmingly, a study found that many cases of published clinical treatments were either:

- not as effective as claimed (56 %)
- not reproducible (34 %)
- harmful, in a minority of cases.

Reproducibility of science and especially clinical trials is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of medical treatments. Medical personnel and authorities rely on the published data for public health.

Another issue with clinical trial data is that many of these trials are not reporting their outcomes timeously, if at all. It seems companies that sponsor clinical trials are more likely to report their results within the time limit compared to academic institutions. The reason is mostly a matter of resources rather than ill-intent. For example, in academic institutions, doctors working on a research project may start working elsewhere, leaving the data unpublished. However, in some odd occasions clinical trial results remain withheld due to malicious reasons. This is unethical and the scientific community should enforce transparency to overcome these issues.

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Is Ghost Authorship Problematic?

Ghost writers generally consist of statisticians, researchers, medical or technical writers and medical communicators. These individuals are employed by pharmaceutical companies to produce an article from raw data. Some researchers felt that ghost authors limit their academic freedom during the analysis of clinical trial data collected by them.

Academic authors have suggested that approximately 21 % of published medical papers contain ghost authors. If ghost writers are the main contributors to large clinical trials, then this research lacks the two key factors of authorship namely:

- transparency
- accountability

Is this problematic? Sometimes a statistician will analyze trial data, but the researcher will interpret the analysis. Therefore, the statistician will not be an author because their input did not meet the authorship requirements.

However, research papers that lack transparency and accountability are inappropriate for published journal articles. It suggests that undeclared conflicts of interest. This threatens the authenticity of the clinical trials. If an individual contributes to a paper but does not meet the author requirements of the journal, they should be acknowledged.

In Summary

Overall, ghost authors do affect the authenticity of clinical trials. Even if the ghost writers are acting in good faith and reporting the data accurately, their absence in the list of authors seems inappropriate and makes it look as if conflicts of interest are being hidden. In the interest of clinical data authenticity, ghost writer's names should appear on the paper.

Would you trust clinical trial data analyzed a ghost author? Let us know your thoughts in the comments section below.

Category

1. Publishing Research
2. Submitting Manuscripts

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