



## Ethics in Publishing: Ghostwriting, Conflicts of Interest, and the Impact Factor

*Integrity is doing the right thing, even if nobody is watching.* – Jim Stovall, *Wisdom for the Ages*

Certain unsavory aspects of scientific publishing have recently been in the news. Exposés on scientific ghostwriting appeared in the lay press late last year, but the practice has been recognized in the medical and scientific communities for several years. Essentially, ghostwriting is the paid recruitment of a prominent researcher to lend his or her name to a paper actually written wholly or partially by a commercial entity, typically a drug company. As noted in the *Wall Street Journal*, ghostwritten articles appeared in several prestigious medical journals during 2001-03.<sup>1</sup> The practice allows unscrupulous researchers to gain additional publications for their resumé, while the articles present the companies' products in the best light possible. The potential losers are the patients, whose health depends on accurate information reaching their healthcare providers. One such approach by a drug company to a respected author was chronicled by the author herself in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* in 2005.<sup>2</sup> While ghostwritten articles are unlikely to be submitted to *Pediatric Dentistry*, it is disconcerting to realize that it would be difficult to detect whether a submission was ghostwritten. Forewarned is, however, forearmed. As a gatekeeper for valid scientific information, *Pediatric Dentistry* will be alert to the possibility of the practice. If it is ever determined that a ghostwritten article has been published in this journal, readers will be notified in a subsequent issue.

Another ethical issue that arises in scientific publishing is conflict of interest. This is obvious in the case of ghostwriting, but it occurs outside of that practice as well. Each of us has attended continuing education presentations at which the sponsoring organization, or the speakers themselves, declare whether or not a possible conflict of interest exists. Speakers often receive financial or other support from commercial companies; it is reasonable that these relationships be disclosed to the audience so that attendees can raise their "bias antennas." These relationships are not so easily discerned in the written word, however. To assist our readers, the journal's newly revised Instructions to Contributors requires that authors (including those of letters to the editor) disclose financial and personal relationships that might bias their work. Disclosures of this sort are, by necessity, voluntary and dependent on the ethics of the author, but the policy is a step in the right direction. A disclosed conflict of interest is not sufficient reason *per se* to disqualify a submission, just as is the case with commercially-funded research. The potential conflict will be evaluated by the reviewers

and your editor; if the study is published, it will contain a statement identifying the potential conflict.

The third issue involves the ethics of the journals themselves – attempts to manipulate the references used by an author to boost the "impact factor" of the journal.<sup>3</sup> The impact factor is a measure of a journal's importance based on how many other scientific papers cite articles from that journal. Impact factors for thousands of journals are determined annually by Thomson Scientific.<sup>4</sup> As noted in the *Wall Street Journal* article, "Impact factors matter to publishers' bottom lines because librarians rely on them to make purchasing decisions." Impact factors also influence the submission decisions by some authors. The problem described in the *Wall Street Journal* involved a request from a medical journal to the author of a submission to that journal. The editor asked the author to cite more studies that had appeared in the journal, a transparent attempt to manipulate the journal's ranking. Journals may also publish "best of" features – annual recountings of their "most memorable papers," resulting in more citations referring back to the journal itself. Readers of *Pediatric Dentistry* can rest assured that no one involved in the submission and review process – your editor, the reviewers, nor the editorial staff – encourages authors to increase citations from this journal.

To paraphrase that great American philosopher, Forrest Gump, "Ethics is as ethics does." We intend to do it right.

### References

1. Mathews AW. Ghost story: At medical journals, writers paid by industry play big role. *Wall Street Journal*. Dec 13, 2005.
2. Fugh-Berman A. The corporate co-author. *J Gen Int Med* 2005;20:546-8.
3. Begley S. Science journal artfully try to boost their rankings. *Wall Street Journal*. June 5, 2006.
4. Thomson Scientific. Welcome to Thomson Scientific. Available at: <http://www.isinet.com/>. Accessed June 25, 2006.

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