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Session Report

Shackleton's Ghost Writer: Navigating the Landscape of Appropriately Acknowledging Authors

Presenter

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Sir Ernest Shackleton was an Anglo-Irish explorer who led several expeditions to the Antarctic in the early 1900s. After returning from his adventures, Shackleton enlisted Edward Saunders, a reporter from New Zealand, to help him write a book. Saunders took Shackleton's journals and listened to his stories and ultimately wrote 2 books: *The Heart of the Antarctic* and *South*. The latter described the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914 to 1917, better known as the Endurance expedition, with the crew somehow surviving for 497 days in the Antarctic environment. However, Shackleton is listed as the only author in both books. Saunders was given a small acknowledgment in one of the books and is not mentioned in the other. Saunders later wrote of *South*, "If I said that any chapter was entirely mine, I should be telling an untruth. My work was complementary to his. I could say that Shackleton had a remarkable gift of literary suggestion..."

Comparing and contrasting the different standards for authorship between scientific/medical publications and popular literature, Dr Art Gertel posed the question of how Saunders should have been recognized for his contribution in *The Heart of the Antarctic* and *South*. In this surprisingly suspenseful session, Art provided the framework to systematically determine authorship in the 2 contexts.

The foremost authority to set the present-day standard for authorship of scientific and medical publications is the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). The ICMJE developed criteria for authorship¹ that distinguish authors from other types of contributors, and compliance with the ICMJE recommendations is required by most leading biomedical journals.

According to the ICMJE, there are 4 criteria that an individual must meet to qualify as an author:

1. Substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; AND

2. Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND
3. Final approval of the version to be published; AND
4. Accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Individuals who meet all of these criteria should be identified as authors. Individuals who meet some of the criteria should be acknowledged as nonauthor contributors.

In 2022, Good Publication Practice (GPP) guidelines² were updated to emphasize the listing of medical writers as authors if they qualify based on ICMJE criteria for authorship. According to GPP, if medical writers do not meet authorship criteria, their contribution should be disclosed in the acknowledgment section (eg, as a nonauthor contributor). Practices such as ghost writing (ie, failing to list qualified authors as such), ghost authorship, guest authorship (ie, giving authorship credit to those who do not meet appropriate criteria), and relinquishing authorship (ie, forcing otherwise qualified authors to opt off bylines to accommodate academic authors) are inconsistent with GPP. Companies may reimburse authors, but any such payments must be fully disclosed and comply with applicable regulations and company, institutional, journal, and congress policies.

According to GPP, medical writers should be appropriately acknowledged and not treated as ghost writers. To avoid potential conflicts related to authorship, a professional medical writer should have the following in writing before beginning work:

- The authors will control and direct the content of the publication or presentation.
- All authors have agreed to the writer's involvement.
- All authors have a documented agreement with the sponsor that identifies their respective rights, roles, and responsibilities.
- The authors will disclose, at a minimum, the writer's name, professional qualifications, affiliations, funding source, and any other information required by the journal or congress.

Although medical writers typically do not meet ICMJE authorship criteria #1 (ie, substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data), medical writers working on other types of publications like literature reviews may qualify as authors.

So, should Saunders have been recognized for his contribution in *The Heart of the Antarctic* and *South*, if ICMJE or GPP standards were applied? According to ICMJE and GPP, it seems that Saunders likely met ICMJE authorship criteria #2, #3, and #4. Therefore, he should have been recognized for his role as a writer but not as an author. However, given that the 2 books would be considered as popular literature, these standards would not apply, leaving it up to Shackleton to determine the degree of acknowledgment due to Saunders.

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