

Warning: Ghostwriting may be hazardous to your health

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Of the top 50 medical schools in the United States, as defined by the 2009 U.S. News & World Report's research ranking, only 13 - or 26 percent - have publicly available policies in place that strictly prohibit ghostwriting, according to a survey in this week's *PLoS Medicine*.

The survey was conducted by Jeffrey Lacasse, an assistant professor at ASU's School of Social Work on the Downtown Phoenix campus, and Jonathan Leo, from Lincoln Memorial University-DeBusk College of Osteopathic Medicine, in Harrogate, Tenn., who define medical ghostwriting as "the practice of pharmaceutical companies secretly authoring journal articles published under the byline of academic researchers."

"The ability of industry to exercise clandestine influence over the peer-reviewed medical literature is a serious threat to public health," say Lacasse and Leo. In 2009, the Institute of Medicine recommended that all U.S. academic medical centers create specific publication guidelines banning ghostwriting, but the new survey suggests that many schools are not following this recommendation.

Physicians and health professionals rely on medical journal articles - especially those from top academic centers - to guide their understanding of a patient's health condition and choice of the best treatment. Ghostwritten articles may exaggerate a treatment's benefits and downplay its harms.

The authors of the report searched for publicly available documents issued by the 50 schools to see if medical schools laid out clear policies about ghostwriting and authorship. They found that a quarter of the schools have an authorship policy that does not clearly ban all aspects of ghostwriting. More than half - 26 schools - had no authorship policies published online.

Lacasse and Leo call for increased awareness of this issue in the academic community and creation of enforceable, specific publication guidelines which prohibit ghostwriting. They say that deans of academic medical centers can eliminate an important threat to public health by simply enacting and enforcing a strict ban on medical ghostwriting.

More information: www.plosmedicine.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pmed.1000230

Provided by Arizona State University

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