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Ghost writing and Conflict of Interest — Editor’s Comments

The above correspondence deals with two important editorial issues that need further discussion and clarification from the journal’s perspective.

First is the issue of ghostwriting. The journal allows, encourages, and may even facilitate suggestions to and correction of articles by medical editors. This needs to be clearly revealed on submission, explaining the role of the medical editor in the article preparation, the source of funding, and explicit confirming that the article is primarily written by the author(s) and not by the medical editor. In the case of the article by Schüpbach et al, all of the above were accomplished. The question raised by Blomstedt and Hariz about the role of authors in the actual writing of the article has been addressed in the reply letter by Schüpbach et al.

Second is the very important issue of authors’ relationships with companies marketing a given product. Currently, commercial companies develop the majority of projects assessing novel drug therapies and technological advances, such as the one discussed by Schüpbach et al. Thus, most key opinion leaders and researchers will inevitably have some degree of interaction with commercial companies. This is not an issue per se. The critical point is to reveal such relationships when publishing an article such as the Viewpoint by Schüpbach et al. In this instance, the authors failed to disclose that a company had actually covered the expenses and organization of the meeting from which the article originated. That information should have been explicitly indicated in both the article and the covering Letter to the Editor on submission. Authors have now stated that the actual meeting content and discussions were free of commercial bias. The fact that a person who is currently working for the same company had also corrected the article should have also been communicated as part of complete transparency, but we also understand that interactions between scientists working for a given company and academics are commonplace nowadays. Nevertheless, we consider these serious omissions that passed unnoticed.

I have discussed these issues with the editorial team and publisher, the chairperson of the Oversight Publication Committee, and the president of the Movement Disorder Society. We realize that Schüpbach and his colleagues have a well-recognized academic trajectory, are highly respected colleagues, and have an excellent record of appropriate conduct in managing their research projects and academic and clinical responsibilities. We also agreed that the responses provided to the Letter from Drs. Blomstedt and Hariz are satisfactorily clear and recognize the omissions.

I would like to stress that revealing to the journal and readership one’s conflicts or potential conflicts of interest are an obligation of the authors. We rely on authors for such declaration. Neither Movement Disorders nor any other journal can police authors to reveal their relationships and conflicts of interest. Science on the whole and publication in particular depend on the integrity of the main actors. I trust that the experience commented on here will illuminate for all of us the potential problems and emphasize the need to release all relevant information regarding the preparation and generation of an article.

Jose A. Obeso, Chief Editor

Reference


The Paper That Wrote Itself—A Ghost Story

We read with interest the article by Schüpbach and colleagues. What struck us was that its tone and content differ from what we are used to read in the scientific literature. Hypothetical arguments are presented, focusing on possible advantages of implants from one DBS company compared with another. It is pointed out that “There are currently two commercially available systems” with directional leads and, without providing any patient data, the competitor of Boston Scientific is labeled as “problematic.” It “may not support the selection of the

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Relevant conflicts of interests/financial disclosures: MH has received honoraria and / or travel expenses from Medtronic, StJude, Boston Scientific and Elekta for speaking at meetings. PB is consultant for Medtronic and Abbott and has received consultancy fees and honoraria/travel expenses for speaking at meetings. He is a shareholder in Mithridatium AB.

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most advantageous field.” Another potential issue is “only explicitly controlled” with the system from Boston Scientific. The technique used by Boston Scientific “may be the preferred paradigm.”

Thus, it was our impression that this article shared common features, concerning style and arguments, with commercial advertisements from Boston Scientific.²

In the printed article, it is stated that there are no relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures. In “funding agency” it is reported that “The services of the medical writer were funded by Boston Scientific.” It is further acknowledged that “The draft manuscript was prepared by Deborah Nock (Medical WriteAway, Norwich, UK), with full revision and approval from all authors. Thanks are given to David Blum for additional writing and editorial support.”

The additional material online reveals that none of the 9 listed authors have contributed with anything except “review and critique” of the manuscript. Thus, conception, organization, execution, and the writing of the article was done by the medical writer funded by Boston Scientific and the person named David Blum. No further information or disclosures are given regarding David Blum. However, a Google search revealed that David Blum is employed by Boston Scientific and holds patents of possible relevance to the subject at hand.

Thus, none of the 9 listed authors have written the article and none of the 2 persons who have actually written the article is enlisted among the authors. The author guidelines for Movement Disorders requests that “a statement that no ghost writing by anyone not named on the author list must be included,” referring to an editorial.³ Here, the Editors write: “We are aware of medical writing enterprises that extend invitations to researchers to write articles on their behalf” and “reports that are completely or substantially composed by people not listed as authors fall into a vague but dangerous zone that threatens the credibility of authors and the journal that would print such matter.”

In this article, with its discussion on possible advantages of implants from Boston Scientific versus its competitor, it is problematic if a ghost writer from Boston Scientific is involved without mentioning anywhere his allegiance to this company.

Finally, it is stated under “relevant conflict of interests/financial disclosures” that the authors have “nothing to declare,” which contradicts the information provided online.

In summary, this publication breaches important guidelines for publication generally and in particular for Movement Disorders.

References


2. Vericise™ PC DBS System and Vericise Cartesia™ Directional Lead: Reshaping the future of DBS Therapy. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spiDHWSs5hc.180301


Reply to “The paper that wrote itself—a ghost story”

We read the letter by Drs Blomstedt and Hariz titled “The Paper That Wrote Itself—A Ghost Story”¹ concerning out viewpoint article titled “Directional Leads for Deep Brain Stimulation: Opportunities and Challenges.”² We disagree with the statements made by Drs Blomstedt and Hariz.

Our viewpoint article originated from an expert meeting of the authors to discuss the use of directional DBS technology, which was supported by Boston Scientific by paying for the meeting facilities and travel and the presence of a freelance medical writer, Deborah Nock, selected by ourselves. Her role at the meeting was to create a protocol (white paper) of the group discussion for internal purposes of Boston Scientific. Boston Scientific did not take any active role in the protocolled scientific discussions of the group. The discussion was free of commercial bias, as it was not restricted to a specific product, but addressed directional DBS technology in general, including other commercial or investigational devices represented by the clinical or study experience of the group members. Deborah Nock minutely the discussion, but did not add any content on her own.

After the meeting, the group decided that the results of the discussion would be of general interest to the movement disorder community and asked Michael Schüpbach to prepare a manuscript for submission. It was decided that a “viewpoint” is the appropriate publishing format, as the discussion results should be clearly identifiable as a an expert opinion standpoint for triggering further scientific discussions in the field rather than providing a clinical or scientific recommendation in a novelty area with insufficient evidence. We therefore chose cautious phrasings not to overstate what is our expert opinion, that is, a “viewpoint.” The technical properties of the commercially available systems, however, are physically given, and the statements in our viewpoint concerning the ensuing programming possibilities are free of bias as they reflect the laws of physics. We intentionally relativized these statements as there are no clinical data available yet to correlate the hypothetical technical advantages with outcome measures.

Michael Schüpbach, Lars Timmermann, and Jens Volkmann elaborated the notes and summaries out of Deborah


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