

UPenn Looks The Other Way At Ghostwriting

By Ed Silverman // [March 1st, 2012](#) // 9:02 am

[9 Comments](#)



The University of Pennsylvania has denied allegations made by one of its professors that several other academics – including his department chair – allowed their names to be added to a medical journal manuscript, but gave control of the contents to GlaxoSmithKline, according to his attorney. The study, which was funded by the drugmaker and the National Institutes of Health, looked at the impact of the Paxil antidepressant on patients with bipolar disorder.

At the same time, the university has acknowledged a claim by the professor, Jay Amsterdam, that the 2001 study was ghostwritten by Scientific Therapeutics Information, his attorney tells us. However, he says the university is not planning on taking any action in connection with the ghostwriting. The study, which was published by the American Journal of Psychiatry ([see here](#)), did not mention that STI played any role (here is an [email](#) in which STI employee Sally Laden discusses that she would work on the paper).

“They said his allegations were not meritorious, although they did find that the publication at issue was ghostwritten,” says Bijan Esfandiari, the attorney, citing a letter and other documents he received from the university. “They acknowledged that a marketing firm was involved in drafting, and everything associated with, the issue. But in response to our complaint, they said that, at the time these events took place, which was between 1998 and 2001, ghostwriting was standard practice and everyone was doing this, so therefore, we’re not going to punish any individuals.”

We asked the university for a response, but have not received a reply. We will update you accordingly. [UPDATE: Late Thursday, March 1, UPenn sends us a statement that mirrors what Esfandiari tells us. [You can read it right here.](#)]

Amsterdam, 62, last year filed a complaint with the federal Office of Research Integrity charging scientific misconduct. In a letter to the ORI, he alleged “the published manuscript was biased in its conclusions, made unsubstantiated efficacy claims and downplayed the adverse event profile of Paxil.” He also claimed he was a co-principal investigator, but was excluded from the final data review, analysis and publication ([here is the letter](#)).

As we noted at the time the complaint was lodged, the letter accused the published authors of

engaging in scientific misconduct by allowing their names to be attached to the study, which has since been cited more than 250 times over the past decade ([here is a partial list](#)). The listed lead author was Charles Nemeroff, the chair of the University of Miami psychiatry department, who was a poster boy for undeclared conflicts of interest among academic researchers and a purported co-author of a book that was published by the American Psychiatric Association, but composed by STI ([read this](#)).

Along with the letter to ORI, Amsterdam attached numerous documents that he sent as evidence that “most, if not all” of the authors were chosen by Glaxo. The documents indicated that Amsterdam, who actively enrolled many patients in the study, protested his exclusion from the review and publication to another of the authors, Dwight Evans, who chairs the Penn psychiatry department, and was his supervisor (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)). We left a message for Evans, but he has not responded. For its part, the university last year promised to conduct an investigation.

However, Esfandiari tells us that pertinent documents were offered by STI to the university under a protective order, but the school declined to pursue them because it was uncomfortable with the terms of the order. “Penn chose not to get them or review them or include them in their investigation,” he says. Esfandiari was aware of the documents since his firm has filed litigation against Glaxo over Paxil side effects and marketing. Meanwhile, he says Amsterdam will file objections with the ORI, as well as Senator Chuck Grassley, who investigated ghostwriting, medical journals and drugmakers.

At the time that Amsterdam lodged his complaint, by the way, a Glaxo spokeswoman wrote us to say that Glaxo employees were involved in developing the manuscript and were listed as authors...but the “article was written more than 10 years ago and we do not have details about the development of the manuscript.” She added that Amsterdam’s involvement in the study is noted in the acknowledgments section of the published manuscript.

We should note that the episode offers a dash of irony. University president Amy Gutmann also chairs the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues ([see here](#)). When the Amsterdam complaint was filed, the Project on Government Oversight, a watchdog group that has tracked the NIH and conflicts of interest, wrote President Obama to ask that Gutmann be removed from her position. Why? She is tasked with setting the tone and course of the national bioethics mandate, but is overlooking ghostwriting at her own university ([see this](#)).

Equally ironic, a [1999 article](#) in The Lancet quotes Arthur Caplan, who heads the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania, as saying this about ghostwriting: Wherever the article appears, “the reader has a right to expect that the person whose name is on an article in a scientific journal is the person who wrote it. I don’t think we should have to be looking for ghosts, goblins, or any other sprites that might have been involved, but aren’t credited or acknowledged.” Gutmann, however, is apparently ignoring the opinion of her own faculty expert.

ghost pic thx to [mattwiison](#) on flickr

Comments

harpy

March 1st, 2012
10:14 am

and they seem to be only mildly interested in [allegedly stolen research](#)

Elmore

March 1st, 2012
10:39 am

There are literally thousands of people who took part in the whole ghostwriting industry, and probably tens of thousands who knew about it. It was the standard for a long, long time.

Bernard Carroll

March 1st, 2012
12:24 pm

No, Elmore, it wasn't the standard for a long, long time. It was widespread but it wasn't the standard. I have been in academic psychiatry since 1967. I saw the corruption take hold. I saw the leadership of professional societies look the other way. I had plenty of consulting and teaching interactions with Pharma over the years. But ghostwriting was out of the question. That was only for sleazebags. Nemeroff made it an art form, and a lot of people like Evans who went along with him to get along with him now can rue the day.

[Michael S. Altus, PhD, ELS](#)

March 1st, 2012
2:52 pm

Dr. Carroll (March 1, 2012; 12:24 pm), the corruption started taking hold before you started off in academic psychiatry in 1967.

Prominent psychopharmacologist Nathan S. Kline, MD, keenly presaged most all of the abuses in the relationship between psychiatry and the pharmaceutical industry in an editorial, "Relation of Psychiatry to the Pharmaceutical Industry", published in AMA Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry. 1957 (June), Volume 77, pages 611-615.

One of the many abuses the Kline referred to is "We write it, you sign it.":

"There is certainly nothing immoral about sending the draft of an article dealing with a drug to the appropriate pharmaceutical house for comment which may provide information unknown to the author (published or unpublished), but is certainly below professional dignity to have the pharmaceutical house write the article, to which the investigator merely affixes his signature.... [This and other abusive] incidents have occurred within the past year..."

Tim

March 1st, 2012
3:40 pm

"...and downplayed the adverse side effects of Paxil...")

And just today in the L.A. Times, a front-page story of a 32 year old mother who stands accused of drowning her two young daughters in a bathtub. The mother was “suffering from anxiety and was on antidepressants. She had burning pain in her back and her stomach. ‘She felt like she was going to die’...said her husband. “Nobody listened to her.”

Lest it seem that downplaying adverse side effects is a harmless exercise.

Michael S. Altus, PhD, ELS

March 1st, 2012

3:54 pm

Elmore (March 1st, 2012, 10:39 am),

I don't know how many people took part in “the whole ghostwriting industry.” In various public forums, and now here, I have admitted to being one of them, which I regret.

It is hard to know how many medical writers have taken part because ghostwriting is intended to be concealed.

Besides, untoward pharmaceutical company input into articles, particularly narrative reviews (a review in which an author selects what to discuss), works differently now.

A pharmaceutical company contracts with medical communications company to develop an article. The medical communications company recruits an opinion leader to be named as author of the article. The medical communications company and the opinion leader agree on an outline, and then company writers search the literature and prepare drafts for the “author's” approval. An acknowledgment names a medical writer working at the medical communications company “provided editorial assistance,” and that the pharmaceutical company supported development of the manuscript.

In this way, ghostwriting has not occurred because the writer's involvement has been disclosed. However, given that the writer's contribution has been as author of the ideas besides being writer of the words, the writer should be identified as an author and not merely acknowledged for providing editorial assistance.

For two examples describing aspects of this procedure, go to two blog entries:

1. “Why I Shouldn't Read Non-Systematic Review Articles: Special Pleadings and Undercover Authors” (December 16, 2010), at Health Care Renewal (<http://tinyurl.com/3cdwh9n>).

2. “Subject: Invitation to Author a Review Article” Dec. 6, 2009), at the Carlat Psychiatry Blog (<http://tinyurl.com/2bzefj3>).

**original
industry insider**

March 1st, 2012
4:12 pm

If the means justify the ends, then just maybe if what Dr Kline did to pull in a few bucks to help establish an entire mental health institute named in his memory, then I’m willing to cut him a break. Let’s not throw the baby out with the bathwater here.

In psychiatry, when a mental status examination is performed, it is customary to ask the patient to interpret the following proverb: “people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones”. That proverb could be applied to most of the posters, who should examine their own consciences before being so quick to judge the “malfeasance” of others.

<http://www.rfmh.org/nki/>

Betsy

March 1st, 2012
6:05 pm

In 1998, a professor of psychiatry from Oslo, Norway was to have presented the successful trials of Paxil at a medical conference I had in Manhattan. He phoned me before the conf to tell me that he would not be able to report on Paxil’s success, since it failed the latest trial. I told him please to come to my conf. anyway and to present his findings.

That was 14 years ago, and we’re still selling, marketing and manufacturing that very same drug.

Elmore

March 2nd, 2012
7:49 am

I didn’t say the practice was good, especially in hindsight. I did say it was very common and many people knew about it and took part. This is a plain fact. It made a lot of money for a lot of people. It enabled the marketing departments of pharma companies to control a lot of what was published. There were whole companies and divisions of companies that did nothing but this.

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