

## Editorial



# Research misconduct using a ghostwriter in a paper-writing company

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- ▶ See the article “A pilot study to assess a risk of a high-risk group of low back pain membership in workers who perform the manual material handling tasks” in volume 33, number 1, e34.
- ▶ See the article “Retraction Notice to: A pilot study to assess a risk of a high-risk group of low back pain membership in workers who perform the manual material handling tasks (Ann Occup Environ Med 2021;33:e34)” in volume 35, number 1, e37.

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### Competing interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

The *Annals of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AOEM)* has retracted a previously published paper owing to the discovery of significant research misconduct, including plagiarism and substantial alterations to authorship.<sup>1,2</sup> The investigation committee, under *AOEM's* Editorial Board, found that the research misconduct affected one published paper, one rejected paper, and one submitted paper. The Editorial Board has decided to publish this editorial to outline the severity of the misconduct, including detailing of the incident to help readers recognize the content of the misconduct and the process involved in its handling to prevent similar problems from arising in the future.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND INVESTIGATION PROGRESS

On May 13, 2022, the Korean Society of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (KSOEM), the publisher of *AOEM*, received an e-mail from an anonymous KSOEM member raising concerns regarding papers submitted to *AOEM* that had allegedly been written by a ghostwriter. The e-mail contained a link to the blog of the alleged ghostwriter involved. Subsequently, the *AOEM* Editorial Board decided to form an investigation committee.

On May 17, 2022, the Investigation Committee was formed comprising 7 members: 3 from the *AOEM* Editorial Board, 1 from the KSOEM Secretary General, 1 from the Training Committee for Residents in Occupational and Environmental Medicine, and 2 external research integrity experts. After performing a thorough investigation, the Investigation Committee identified the suspected ghostwriting of the 3 manuscripts and requested written statements from the first author and corresponding author of the accused manuscripts. Following an independent discussion, and the Investigation Committee reached a preliminary conclusion. Notably, the first authors of 2 manuscripts did not respond to the investigation; therefore, based on the preliminary conclusion, on July 5, 2022, the Investigation Committee requested that the researcher's institution at the time the research was conducted review the alleged

research misconduct. On May 23, 2023, after investigating the research ethics integrity, the researcher's institution provided an opinion letter to KSOEM stating their agreement with the *AOEM* Investigation Committee's assessment that there was a significant possibility that research misconduct had occurred. The Investigation Committee reviewed the opinion letter and reached a final conclusion.

## MISCONDUCT CONTENT

An online business was operating that offered ghostwriting services for academic papers. The company offered a comprehensive range of services that encompassed the entire paper writing process, including topic selection, data analysis and interpretation, manuscript drafting, journal selection, manuscript submission, and revision. Authors can purchase their papers for a fee. The company was accessible to anyone who searched for "paper ghostwriting" on Google.

Unlike the 'paper mills' that pre-write and submit papers, then add authors afterward,<sup>3</sup> this service seemed to tailor papers based on the specific requests of the customer. The exact scale of this operation was unclear, although information from the company's blog suggested it had been utilized by various sectors, including clinical departments, pharmaceuticals, natural sciences, physical education, and tourism.

The utilization of a full ghostwriting service equates to both plagiarism and significant alterations in authorship. According to the Ministry of Education's Guidelines for Securing Research Ethics (Ministry of Education Decree No. 263, July 17, 2018., partially revised<sup>4</sup>) Article 12, Paragraph 1, Item 3, plagiarism is defined as the act of utilizing another person's original ideas or creations that are not in general knowledge without properly indicating the source, thereby causing a third party to perceive them as one's own creations. Ultimately, papers produced through a full ghostwriting service are the creation of the ghostwriter, not the named authors. Thus, they inherently involve plagiarism. Furthermore, the involvement of a ghostwriter inherently means that authorship has been unfairly attributed.

## CONCLUSION

The co-authors of the papers, particularly those beyond the first author, stated that they were unaware of the situation. However, all named authors are fully responsible for the paper,<sup>5</sup> thus, simply not knowing cannot lead to an exemption from liability. Therefore, to prevent similar situations from arising, there must be open and sufficient communication between authors during the research writing process. Since the corresponding author on papers is generally a senior researcher, and the first author is often their junior, the corresponding author should actively uphold research ethics and set a strong example for their junior colleagues.

The *AOEM* Editorial Board takes this issue very seriously, and we sincerely apologize to the journal's readers for our inability to spot and stop such an incident during the article's submission and review processes. A research paper represents a work of intellectual contribution from the named authors; thus, researchers, reviewers, and journals all need to work together to ensure the integrity associated with academic research and paper publishing remains intact.

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