Dear Dr ten Have,

We, the Global Alliance of Publication Professionals (GAPP; http://www.ismpp.org/gapp), monitor and respond to articles that impact upon publication professionals and appreciate Springer’s commitment to ethical publication practices. Indeed, your “Publishing Ethics for Journals” guideline notes that “Almost every step in the publishing process involves important ethical principles.” We are writing to you about one such step, the citation step, as we believe there has been a case of citation bias in the chapter on ghostwriting in the recent Springer e-book *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics*. The content published by Springer has been marred by the author’s use of selective and outdated citations. Whilst we realize that citation bias is not as alarming as other areas of research waste and misconduct, it is a source of bias that is gaining attention, and we would feel remiss not to highlight our concerns to you. If Springer holds its authors to the highest standards for each step of the publication process and takes action when it sees a problem, Springer and Springer’s customers will benefit. We hope the example we describe below helps Springer take appropriate action.

At the outset, we want to state that we are strident and active campaigners for eradicating ghostwriting. We, like Professor Sismondo, believe it is an unethical practice. However, we have major concerns with Professor Sismondo’s article on ghostwriting, which include:

- The repeated implication that ghostwriting is common,
- The dismissal of efforts to reduce the incidence of unethical authorship practices (including ghostwriting), and
- The lack of constructive advice to combat ghostwriting.

Clearly, our concerns are based on the author’s content and the author’s content is based on citations Professor Sismondo has selected. The method for choosing references is not indicated and does not appear to be systematic. Whether intentional or not, the selected references do not reflect the current state of the literature on ghostwriting. The selective use of outdated references has resulted in a published article that misleads Springer’s customers on the current prevalence of ghostwriting and the ongoing efforts used to combat it. Even the most basic and quick search of PubMed turns up recent and relevant
references on ghostwriting (see PubMed output below) that have been overlooked by Professor Sismondo.

The abstract opens with the sweeping statement that “Many medical journal articles are ghostwritten and have honorary authors.” Whilst we agree that ghostwriting and honorary (guest) authorship are undesirable practices, a recent systematic review highlights that the prevalence of ghostwriting is currently low and decreasing.4 Another recent survey of industry-funded publication practices found that 99% of respondents working in medical writing companies are strictly prohibited from ghostwriting.5 Regarding authorship, medical writers are sometimes cited as examples of ghost authors. However, the prevalence is low because medical writers rarely fulfil all four ICMJE authorship criteria (usually only fulfilling the first part of the second criterion, “drafting the work”). It is now widely recognised [by medical journal editors,6,7 the pharmaceutical industry,8,9 and communication professionals10-12] that the contributions of medical writers should be acknowledged and that they only qualify for authorship if they satisfy all four criteria.6 There clearly remains a lack of awareness in distinguishing between the ethical, transparent, and legitimate assistance from professional medical writers and the unethical and hidden assistance from ghost writers, but this chapter did not attempt to make this differentiation.

Our second concern regards the dismissal of efforts to reduce the incidence of unethical authorship practices, including ghostwriting, and ghost and guest authoring. “…a ghostwritten article is attributed to those listed as its authors and fails to credit its writers. For example, local power imbalances within a department or laboratory might allow some people to demand authorship and to exclude it from others.” In this example, the author refers to ghost and guest authorship rather than ghost writing, where ghost authorship is an individual who satisfies authorship criteria but is not credited as an author,13 and a guest author is someone who is included as an author despite not satisfying authorship criteria. This article fails to recognise the evolution of authorship criteria and the models to improve transparency that have been introduced over the past decade. Codes of ethics and conduct, the educational efforts by professional organizations and an “anti-ghostwriting” checklist14 are not even mentioned.

Finally, the author allocates most of his chapter to impugning ghostwriters and industry rather than to proposing solutions. A recent systematic review on why authors fail to
publish their research showed that the most frequent and most important reason was “lack of time.” Professional medical writers provide legitimate support for authors, helping them complete many of the time-intensive tasks required to prepare a manuscript for publication. The need to differentiate professional medical writing from ghostwriting is, however, essential and numerous guidelines to direct the ethical behaviour of authors and all contributors are now available and should be recognised.

In the opinion of GAPP, whereas the subject of ghosts (writers, authors, managers and researchers) is worthy of discussion, all the efforts of medical journal editors, the pharmaceutical industry, professional associations and governments to eliminate these practices over the past decade have to be presented. We suggest that when the next edition of the Encyclopedia is commissioned, that a more balanced and current viewpoint is published, without the appearance of selective citation.

Thank you for your consideration.

The Global Alliance of Publication Professionals (www.gappteam.org)

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Copy to Harmen van Paradijs, Vice President Human Sciences Publishing
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Screenshot of basic PubMed search on “ghostwriting” – On what basis were these relevant and recent references excluded?
Screenshot of basic PubMed search on “medical writing AND ethics” – On what basis were these relevant and recent references excluded?

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