How to involve the public as co-authors

Introduction

There are many ways to disseminate information and opinion, including TV, books, radio, and online social media. This Guide is about how a public author, and an academic author can prepare and submit a co-authored paper to an academic journal. In this paper, the term 'public' means patients, service users, carers, and members of the wider public. Some of the ideas in this Guide may be transferable to other contexts (such as writing about service improvement rather than research), and the issues facing the wider publishing industry[1] also affect the academic press.

Set the parameters

Decide what kind of paper you plan to write. Many scientific papers use standard subheadings: Introduction, Method, Results and Discussion. In some co-authored papers the voice of each author can be distinguished, the narrative is written by the powerholder and the authors explain how they collaborated. Check your co-authors share the same vision of the finished paper.

Consider intellectual property. Submit original work rather than pre-published or plagiarised material. Find out about the complex online system for submitting your paper and who ends up owning the intellectual property.

Work out who will be listed as an author. Anyone who is named as an author must have made a substantial contribution to at least two of the following activities: (i) contributed ideas that influenced the choice of topic and shaped the way in which the work was done; (ii) helped with collecting, analysing, and interpreting data; (iii) drafted or revised the text and (iv) approved the final version. In addition, all authors should be able to identify which co-authors are responsible for other parts of the work[2] and have confidence in their co-author's contribution and integrity. Medical journal editors require authors to sign a declaration that they have seen the full data and take responsibility for its integrity. Agree who will be listed as an author, the order of their names and who will appear in the acknowledgements. Negotiate appropriate use of pseudonyms and anonymity.

Choose a target journal. Check your plans fit with the style of your target journal. Most academic journals are peer-reviewed and some welcome papers that are supported by videos or other formats. The journal might be regarded as high impact or predatory, promote public authors, reach communities, or influence services, take more than a year to publish, or satisfy the Patients Included Charter[3].

Think through money and timing. Public co-authors should be treated equitably with others, and this includes being remunerated. Avoid excessive payments that create a conflict of interest. The fixed-term contracts of many academic staff reinforce deadlines, while public co-authors may not be ready to write until much later. Special arrangements may be needed to administer payments if the writing is scheduled after the project is over and accounts have been closed. Author's royalties can be collected by ALCS and PLR and distributed on an annual basis.

Understand the context

Reasons to co-author	Hindrances
Editors support public co-authors[4]. International standards[5] and evidence are available[6].	Some guidance[7] on how to report public involvement in health research does not mention public co-authors. One systematic review found a weak evidence base for co-authorship[8].
The academic author must get published	It's tough to get published in high impact journals. Only 40% of research projects get their research published within the required timeframe, another 40% are never published[i], and some are then retracted. The public co-author is free to walk away.
It adds legitimacy to experiential knowledge.	Academic style can leave public co-authors feeling incompetent and compromised.
It keeps academics focused on patient experience.	Academic papers rarely affect services. Career advancement is prioritised over service improvement.
'Nothing about me without me' approach to public services.	Coproduction efforts favour other activities over co-authoring. Co-authoring is tacked on at the end instead of coproducing the entire project.
Involving Public authors can improve the quality of the writing.	It is time-consuming and academia demands rapid output.
Academic culture favours innovation and publication	University culture can favour competition rather than collaboration.
All research receiving UK public funds must be reported in an open access journal so it can be read by anyone	Many journals charge the researchers a fee instead of charging the reader and this blocks poorly funded writers.

Learn the co-author's craft together

When two or more people with varying experience of writing collaborate to produce a paper together, it is helpful to have some candid discussions:

- Are you training the public co-author to write like an academic? How will you resolve disagreements over content, structure, or style? Is it really co-authored if the academic always has the last word; when they only comply with the public author when they agree anyway; or when a description of the collaboration omits all disagreement?

- Learn about academic writing and retain your authentic voice[10]. Seek out advice about writing, co-authoring, and reporting on public involvement.

- Look at examples of each other's writing before committing.

- Consider starting small by reviewing a journal submission or writing a Plain Language Summary[11]. What will be included in your paper? Evidence or opinion? Will there be several papers on separate aspects of the work, or does it all go into one?

- Agree who will visualise, draft, critique, edit, revise and submit the paper. Appoint a lead author who will amend grammar, spelling and structure. Recognise that most writing teams are lopsided partnerships where one person does most of the actual writing after the co-authors have met to discuss their ideas for the paper.

- Clarify which editing tasks are needed at this stage: re-order the sequence of ideas; add missing sections; revise the main messages and strengthen imagery; spot errors or missing viewpoints; identify unclear, confusing, or clumsy statements; sharpen grammar, spelling and punctuation.

- Feedback from academic reviewers can be helpful or cruel, dismissive[12] and inconsistent. Some teams assign responsibility for handling reviewers' feedback to the lead researcher, and so in this scenario, co-authors do not see the work at all in the interval between first submission and publication. Membership of a group of public co-authors can provide both advice and emotional support.

Conclusion

Writing together has the potential to be a mutual learning exercise where the final output is better than the content the co-authors could have produced on their own. Where co-authors bring complementary gifts, such as academic knowledge and lived experience, the experience can be enriching to all. Achieving this goal demands honesty, courage, and respect. The messages in this guide will be helpful to co-authors who work together to write up their research findings, but also to co-authors who combine their lived experience and clinical skills to report on service innovation, and its impact on patients and beneficiaries.

References

[1] Saha A & van Lente S (2020) *Rethinking 'diversity' in publishing*. Goldsmiths Press. Available at https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking_diversity_in-publishing_WEB.pdf.

[2] International Committee of Medical Journal Editors http://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf.

[3] See https://patientsincluded.org/journals/

[4] International Society of Medical Publication Professionals voted in support of the involvement of patients in publications at the 2018 Annual Meeting.

[5] See the GPP3 guidelines at http://annals.org/aim/fullarticle/2424869/good-publication-practice-communicating-company-sponsored-medical-research-gpp3.

[6] Arnstein L, Wadsworth AC, Yamamoto BA. *et al.* (2020) Patient involvement in preparing health research peer-reviewed publications or results summaries: a systematic review and evidence-based recommendations. *Research Involvement & Engagement* **6,** 34. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-020-00190-w

[7] Jones, J., Cowe, M., Marks, S. et al. (2021) Reporting on patient and public involvement (PPI) in research publications: using the GRIPP2 checklists with lay co-researchers. *Research Involvement & Engagement* **7,** 52. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-021-00295-w.

[8] See https://cdn.instantmagazine.com/upload/18080/envision-patient-research-poster-book.3e44f7300085.pdf.

[9] DeVito NJ, Bacon S, Goldacre B. Compliance with legal requirement to report clinical trial results on ClinicalTrials. gov: a cohort study. *The Lancet.* 2020 Feb 1;395(10221):361-9.

[10] Gustaaf Bos and Rafaella van den Bosch Case 5.4 in Banks S & Brydon-Miller M (2019) *Ethics in Participatory Research for Health and Social Well-Being: Cases and Commentaries* Abingdon: Routledge.

[11] The Plain Language Summaries of Publications Toolkit is at https://www.envisionthepatient.com/plstoolkit/.

[12] Gerwing TG, Allen Gerwing AM, Avery-Gomm S. Choi C-Y, Clements JC & Rash JA (2020) Quantifying professionalism in peer review. *Res Integr Peer Rev* **5,** 9. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-020-00096-x.