Dear Editors

Good Practice for Conference Abstracts and Presentations: GPCAP (RIPR-D-18-00015)

The authors have created comprehensive guidance on an important issue - how to disclose and communicate company-sponsored research at academic conferences. The guidance they have developed is organized in a way that will help publication professionals, professional medical writers and project managers to work with authors and conference organizers to develop abstracts, posters and oral presentations appropriately and ethically. The authors have consulted widely on their draft guidelines, including posting a preprint for comment. I recommend the article for publication in Research Integrity and Peer Review.

Reporting the development of guidelines is never straightforward, and there is room for different points of view on how it should best be done. My recommendation to the authors would be to follow an Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion (IMRAD) structure, as in published examples of other initiatives [1, 2]. This recommendation is informed by the AGREE II recommendations (http://www.agreetrust.org/agree-ii/), which the authors could consider referring to and citing.

Introduction

At the opening of the Introduction, it would be worth explaining the importance of scientific and medical conferences for early communication of and feedback on results, and perhaps mentioning that some analyses are only ever disseminated as abstracts [3]. Of course, conference presentations are as relevant for research funded by industry as for research with other funding, and it might be worth touching on the particular significance to pharmaceutical companies of ensuring that results are communicated in an ethical and appropriate way. As the authors explain,
although there are well-established guidelines for the preparation of journal articles reporting industry-funded research, these are not fully applicable to industry-funded abstracts, posters and oral presentations. This explanation would be a good lead-in to stating the aim of these guidelines, which would ideally be expressed in a sentence at the end of the Introduction.

Methods

Expanding the Development section into a Methods section would further strengthen the article. It could include details of composition of the working group (and, in broad terms, how its members were selected - for example, to ensure coverage of Europe and North America, include pharmaceutical company and communications agency perspectives, and involve people with previous guidelines development experience), as well as mentioning any society involvement/endorsement. A statement could be included to indicate which existing sources of guidance were reviewed (with references to GPP3 and ICMJE guidelines), and any searches that were conducted to support the process could be described.

There is room to say more about how the GPCAP guidance was developed and reviewed (e.g. whether key principles were agreed before writing, whether an outline was developed, whether different authors developed individual sections that were then reviewed by the wider authorship group, and how recommendations specific to different target audiences were developed). One AGREE II criterion is that "The guideline is editorially independent from the funding body" and, while the authors received no funding for this work, a comment on whether the GPCAP guidance was reviewed by colleagues in the authors' organizations would be worthwhile. The wider consultation exercise was a major effort for which the authors deserve much credit, and (not least for the benefit of future guidelines developers) it merits the inclusion of additional details, such as:

- the selection of conferences and/or conference organizers (e.g. by giving the criteria or list used)
- how pharmaceutical industry and communication agency representatives were reached very effectively via conferences and social media
- how many comments were received from how many commenters (if possible).

The PeerJ preprint could then be cited in the reference list if the journal allows.

Results

Reformulating the main guidelines sections as a Results section would enable the authors to provide an upfront overview to guide the reader through the document (e.g. "we developed x principles that were used to develop y recommendations under z themes." Other than that, I have only minor comments on the content of the guidelines, as follows.
Lines 115/116 - 'local language presenters' - do the authors mean 'local presenters' as described in 1.3.1?

Section 1.3.1 (line 231) - could this local presenter be a company representative as mentioned in 1.3.2?

Section 1.3.2 (line 239) - could a local presenter who is a company representative be listed as an author? Currently, it reads as if non-author presenters could include a company representative but it is unclear whether or not a company representative could be an author presenter. For clarity, it might help to combine and shorten sections 1.3.1 and 1.3.2. My understanding is that the authors advise the following: encore presentations can be presented by someone not on the original author list, ideally as a contributor but as an author if the congress requires it, and this presenter can be an appropriately qualified company representative if necessary.

Section 1.3.3 (lines 243-8) - this section feels inconsistent with the previous section. Taken together, they read as if an author can be added to an encore abstract but only if he or she is not a member of the society sponsoring the conference; otherwise, he or she has to be listed as a contributor rather than an author. It is unclear whether the GPCAP authors believe that a sponsoring society member who is a presenter can be added as an author. It would be helpful for the authors to clarify their views here.

Section 2.3 (line 261) - would it be clearer to say that space limitations usually preclude acknowledgement of writing support in the abstract text, and recommend that conference organizers should consider requesting this information and publishing it alongside the abstract?

Section 2.6 (line 272) - is it worth clarifying that secondary analyses can be submitted for conference presentation after the primary analysis has been published (in other words, that abstracts submitted for presentation after the primary analysis has been published should add something new)?

Section 2.7 (line 286) - the authors could consider adding that ideally the online submission should be checked and completed by the lead author even if it is prepared by a third party.

Section 3.2.1 (line 341) - would the authors consider adding that the lead author should check company policies as well as journal policies before agreeing to a poster being publicly posted?

Section 3.2.4 (line 358-62) - in my experience, while companies aim to restrict the online availability of e-posters solely to conference delegates, it is not always possible to ensure that non-delegates cannot access them. Would the authors consider rewording 'these should only be available to conference attendees' to 'these should be targeted at conference attendees only'? Partly in an effort to restrict readership to delegates, some companies (but not all) limit the duration of online availability of e-posters to the duration of the conference, or to a month, several months or a year; would the authors consider deleting the words 'in such cases' and rewording the sentence to say that online availability of e-posters can also be time limited?
The potential for QR codes to link to author videos, data sharing statements and presenter contact details could be covered in this section. Augmented reality (in which viewing the poster through a smartphone provides access to enhanced content) could also be mentioned.

When considering the online availability of posters, oral presentations and author videos or other materials accessed by QR codes or augmented reality, the authors could indicate that the lack of peer review of these materials (as opposed to the abstracts on which they are based) should be taken into account.

Section 4.3 (line 410) - could the authors indicate where previous presentations should be listed (in the abstract or in the poster)?

Section 4.5 (line 418) - consider replacing 'other than' with 'beyond a simple'.

Section 4.7 (line 430) - it would be worth detailing what is meant by a different audience, which might be based on geography, therapeutic area or job role (e.g. payer, pharmacist, nurse).

Section 5.2 (line 451) - do the authors have a view about whether a copyright statement should be included on posters and in oral presentations?

Overall, one aspect of congress posters and oral presentations that the authors have not covered is author agreements, not only in relation to the content and copyright (see section 5.2) but also in relation to the reimbursement of congress fees, and travel, accommodation and subsistence expenses once a presentation has been given. If this is beyond the scope of these guidelines, perhaps this could be made clear in the aims and scope, in a section on limitations and/or a comment about further work.

Another aspect that could be addressed is the emergence of predatory conferences and tools to recognize and avoid them (e.g. Think - Check - Attend).

Finally, the authors could consider directing readers to useful resources on the preparation of legible, readable and engaging posters and oral presentations.

Discussion

The Summary section could be expanded into a Discussion section detailing implications, strengths and limitations, and further work. In my view, GPCAP is a milestone that has the potential to maintain high standards and share best practice, increase confidence in the communication of industry-funded research and ultimately benefit patient care. Further research could include assessment of usage and impact, which could feed into any future update.

Availability of data and material (line 518).

I recommend adding 'Comments on the preprint are available online' under this heading. Would the authors make tabulated data available to interested researchers on request?
Competing interests (line 520)

Some readers might feel sceptical about people working in or for the pharmaceutical industry stating that they have no competing interests. I can understand that there may be no competing interests as such, but it might be worth discussing with the journal whether a heading such as 'Disclosures' could be used instead of 'Competing interests' to disclose the authors' industry links. Some industry critics think that any links with a commercial organization must be a 'competing interest'; I would avoid giving them opportunities to criticize this very valuable initiative for perceived lack of transparency.

Figure

Addition of a simple but memorable Figure that provides an overview of the guidelines would be very helpful, perhaps accompanied by or combined with a Figure summarizing the methodology by which the guidelines were generated.

I hope these comments are useful. Thank you for the opportunity to review this timely and worthwhile manuscript, and I look forward to it being published.

Yours sincerely

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Disclosures

I am an employee and Director of Oxford PharmaGenesis, Oxford, UK, which provides medical writing services to the global biopharmaceutical industry, and a shareholder and Director of Oxford PharmaGenesis Holdings Ltd. I am also Chair of the International Society for Medical Publication Professionals.

References


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An article of importance in its field

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

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