

Editorial Board of the Turkish Journal of Neurology Recognizes Basic Political Statements of the CSE*

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Objective

To offer guidelines useful to biomedical journals as they develop policies and procedures relating to conflict of interest in peer review.

Definition

A widely used American dictionary (Webster's 9th New Collegiate Dictionary) defines conflict of interest as a "conflict between the private interests and the official responsibilities of a person in a position of trust." In scientific publishing, the author of a manuscript, the reviewer, and the editor are all persons "in a position of trust." Conflicts of interest in the publishing can be defined as sets of conditions in which an author, editor, or reviewer holds conflicting or competing interests that could result in bias or improper decisions. The conflicts of interest may only be potential conflicts of interest or only perceived, and not necessarily even potential, conflicts. The determination of whether a conflict of interest actually exists can be extraordinarily difficult and often contentious. Recognizing the potential for conflicts of interest is usually easier; they are common and it is not their existence, but rather their potential to cause bias and failure to acknowledge or recognize conflicts, that causes concern. Such failure, which reflects an insensitivity to the potential for conflict of interest, is troubling, whether it is observed in an author, a reviewer, or an editor.

Ideally, authors are completely objective in presenting their findings, and editors and reviewers are entirely objective in evaluating them. These processes are all prey to biases. Personal, political, financial, academic, or religious considerations can affect objectivity in innumerable ways. The challenge for authors, editors, and reviewers is to recognize the potential for biases arising from conflicts of interest and to respond appropriately.

Financial Conflicts

The most evident type of potential conflict of financial interest is the situation in which a commercial product is under study and the author, reviewer, or editor stands to benefit financially if the assessment of the product goes one way or another. For example, an author reporting investigation of a specific product, at the same time he or she holds equity positions or stock options in the company that makes the products, clearly has the potential to realize direct financial gain if the assessment is favorable. A researcher in the employ of a for-profit enterprise has a slightly less direct relationship to product-related research, but still can reasonably expect to benefit financially if a product does well. In these examples, an individual's "private interests" (i.e., his or her financial interests) are potentially in conflict with his or her "official responsibilities" (i.e., the responsibility of a scientist to seek the truth).

The situation in which an investigator studies a product of a for-profit

enterprise from which the investigator has received monies previously (e.g., as a consultant or in the form of an honorarium or speaking fee) is slightly different. There is now no direct relationship between the evaluation and any personal gain the investigator may anticipate. Nevertheless, the existence of payments even in the past could conceivably influence research and must therefore be regarded as having the potential to present conflicting interest. The examples given above involve authors reporting the results of their research, non-research articles, reviews, and opinion pieces, but they could just as well involve reviewers evaluating a manuscript or editors deciding whether or not to accept a manuscript. There are some subtle differences among authors, reviewers, and editors with respect to conflict of financial interest, but the basic principles apply to all.

Some journals refuse to consider manuscripts describing research involving a commercial product when the research was supported financially by a commercial organization involved in the manufacture or sale of the product. A few journals will not permit editorials or review articles to be authored by individuals with potential conflicts of financial interest, feeling that these pieces rely especially heavily on interpretation and judgment, and thereby make conflict of interest and the potential for bias especially problematic.

Non-Financial Conflicts

Many considerations - intellectual, political, academic, and religious, to mention just a few - can represent "private interests." The challenge for authors, reviewers, and editors is to recognize the potential for these types of conflicts as well as those involving finances, and respond appropriately. Complete objectivity is not often possible, but fairness and even-handedness can reasonably be expected. For example, a reviewer strongly opposed to abortion, on religious or other moral grounds, might have difficulty evaluating a manuscript describing the use of fetal tissue in research in an objective matter. Or an editor who is also chair of a department might have difficulty in reaching objective decisions about manuscripts submitted by his or her faculty because the editor has a "private interest" as a chair in helping the academic advancement of his faculty.

Disclosure

The key to recognizing and dealing with conflicts of interest - financial or non-financial - is disclosure: disclosure to the editor when a manuscript is submitted, and disclosure to the reader when a paper is published. The former provides a means for the manuscript to be evaluated by the editor with full knowledge of all its circumstances, and the latter assures that the reader will have sufficient information to interpret the work appropriately.

*CSE: Council of Science Editors