

Conflict of Interest in the Peer-Review Process: When, Where, and How?

Chair:

Edward J Huth

Annals of Internal Medicine
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

Theron S Rumsey

Journal of Animal Science
Beltsville, Maryland

Reporter:

Colin Gittens

American Journal of Managed Care
Old Bridge, New Jersey

Panelists:

Charles J Parker

Journal of Immunology
Salt Lake City, Utah

Mary D Scheetz

Office of Research Integrity
Rockville, Maryland

Conflicts of interest involving authors are an everyday concern of journal editors. Frequently, however, less notice is given to conflicts that can occur during the peer-

review process. Panelists pointed out that a heightened awareness by all involved in the peer-review process can ensure that such conflicts are minimized and scientific integrity maintained.

Although panelists offered different definitions of conflict of interest, they all agreed that personal gain was usually involved. Theron S Rumsey cast the matter as an ethical issue, saying that conflict of interest occurs when personal benefit takes priority over clarity and accuracy of reporting on research. Charles J Parker emphasized the disagreement “between private interests and official responsibilities in a position of trust”, with the position of trust being the “privileged communication” of the manuscript under review.

Rumsey offered a range of guidelines that can assist in minimizing conflicts and reducing bias in peer review. In general, he said, editors-in-chief and section editors must be leading scientists familiar with the research presented to them. In addition, they must be organized and possessed of a cooperative nature, and their journals should maintain and annually publish peer-review guidelines and policies.

In practical terms, Rumsey suggested that editors-in-chief review every manuscript for matters of fact before ultimate acceptance, that complete records of cor-

respondence and timelines be maintained, and that reviews be reviewed carefully, even as closely as manuscripts themselves. Section editors should also keep those cautions in mind and remain cognizant of reviewers’ biases in selecting them; should not overload reviewers with work; and should not use reviewers who use derogatory comments in their reviews.

Speaking from the reviewer’s perspective, Parker argued that reviewers have a responsibility to the editor and reader to provide an unbiased review. For some aspects of a review (the “official responsibilities”, such as determining scientific merit, originality, and scope), there is little room for conflict of interest. Matters such as a reviewer’s financial interest in a product mentioned in an article, a professional bias, or a personal relationship (whether positive or negative) with the author of a paper fall into his definition of “private interest”. It is in these interests that conflicts occur.

However conflict of interest is defined, Parker argued that the ultimate burden of determining reviewer bias falls on the individual reviewer. Reviewers should ask themselves whether a personal or unreasoned distortion of judgment might occur, should disclose conflicts of interest, and should not use the knowledge of a work in progress to

further their own interests.

A different variety of conflict of interest was discussed by Office of Research Integrity (ORI) representative Mary D Scheetz. As the watchdog agency for the US Office of Public Health and Science (which dispenses funding for grants), Scheetz discussed ORI’s role in investigating and remediating misconduct in the grant peer-review process. Peer review is an essential component of the conduct of science, Scheetz said, and those reviewing grant proposals must remain aware of the serious and confidential nature of the role.

For panelists and audience, “awareness” remained the key. An audience member pointed out that in peer review, “sins of commission are easily recognizable, but sins of omission [such as negligence] are harder to spot.” Participants in the peer-review process must achieve greater recognition of their own and others’ biases and retain a sense of importance regarding their work to lessen conflicts of interest in the process. In addition, greater effort by journals and institutions to define conflicts of interest and establish standards of acceptable practice will aid in reducing conflicts of interest. 