

Conflicts of Interest in Relation to Articles

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Conflicts of interest can occur when physicians are financially associated with pharmaceutical companies. This session focused on research on conflict-of-interest cases.

Sheldon Krinsky, a professor at Tufts University, described his conflict-of-interest research. In the 1980s, conflict of interest became more prominent because of the commercialization of science and because investigative journalists brought the issue into public visibility, he said.

In his research, conducted in the middle 1980s, Krinsky first looked at the number of scientists with dual affiliations (corporate ties). Krinsky defined affiliation as a formal relationship with a corporation, not simply a consulting arrangement. He found that the number of scientists with dual affiliations was increasing dramatically in the biomedical sciences. In major universities, 20% to 30% of biomedical and genetics faculty had ties to corporations; and 30% of National Academy of Sciences members in genetics and biomedical sciences had dual affiliations during the period 1995-1998.

Krinsky's second study was on the like-

lihood that the lead author of an article in any journal would have a financial interest in the content. He and his colleagues looked at 14 high-impact journals and collected information from company annual reports and from the World Trademark Office on patents. The study looked at lead authors from Massachusetts and classified affiliations in 3 ways: the author had a patent directly related to the subject of the published article, was on the advisory board of a company, or was a corporate officer or principal in a company. Of the 789 articles in the study, 33.8% of the lead

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authors met one of the criteria. Only one of the journals in the study had a financial-disclosure policy in effect for the year of the study, 1992.

His third study, not yet published, assessed the frequency of conflict-of-interest policies in journals. Krinsky and his colleagues studied 60 000 articles in 220 journals that had conflict-of-interest policies. Of those journals, 60% to 70% contained no financial disclosures.

Some journals that Krinsky studied included query boxes for the authors to check for personal financial disclosures. Krinsky labeled those journals as template journals, and he found the rate of disclosure in them much higher than in journals that included conflict-of-interest statements in their "information for authors". Some journals used open-ended disclosure questions. The results of studying these journals were interesting, he said, but he did not reveal any clues. The results will be published.

Allan S Detsky—a professor at the University of Toronto, Mount Sinai Hospital, and Toronto Hospital—did a case study of articles on the safety of calcium-channel antagonists (1). The study, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, looked at the relationship between the authors' published work and their ties with pharmaceutical companies. With respect to their attitudes toward the safety of calcium-channel antagonists, Detsky classified authors as critical, neutral, or supportive. Critical authors emphasized concerns about using the antagonists, neutral authors concluded that there was no significant evidence to support either side, and supportive authors recommended using the antagonists.

Of the 70 articles studied, 30 were supportive, 17 were neutral, and 23 were critical. Detsky found that supportive authors were more likely to have financial ties to pharmaceutical companies, even to companies that do not produce calcium-channel antagonists. Similarly, critical authors were likely to be associated with competitors to companies that produce calcium-channel antagonists. Detsky identified the limitations of the study, which included authors' self-reporting of pharmaceutical affiliations and their naivete about conflict of interest. Journals need stricter guidelines for disclosing conflict-of-interest information, Detsky said, and the audience should be aware of possible conflicts of interest in journal articles.

Both presenters suggested that journals print better-defined conflict-of-interest statements for authors to follow. 

Reference

1. Stelfox HT, Chua, G, O'Rourke K, Detsky AS. Conflict of interest in the debate over calcium-channel antagonists. *N Engl J Med* 1998;338:101-6.