

## A Question of Conflict of Interest

A peer reviewer for a journal receives a manuscript documenting increased consumption of natural gas and presenting an analysis that justifies increasing charges to consumers. The reviewer notes that the manuscript cites a reference naming a committee as corporate author and logs on to the committee's Web site for more information. The reviewer notices that the committee's sponsoring organization is a natural gas marketing association and that its board of directors includes an author of the manuscript. The author's membership on the board has not been mentioned in the text or footnotes of the manuscript. Should the reviewer notify the journal? How does this situation affect the review? What mechanism might the journal use to disclose any potential conflict of interest?

### Solutions

This reviewer is an editor's dream come true. She's taken the responsibility very seriously and been very thorough. The reviewer should provide this information to the editor in a cover letter when the review is returned. The knowledge should not interfere with the reviewer's completing the manuscript review, although I would expect the reviewer to examine the paper more carefully for evidence of a biased presentation of results or gaps in the reference list. Ultimately, the editor will need to weigh this information with all reviewers' assessments of the paper's validity when making a decision about publication.

The journal ought to have an established policy about disclosure of conflicts of interest. If the author, by not revealing her or his position on the board of directors, has broken the journal's policy, the editor will need to decide how to handle that issue first. In most cases, I assume that the journal will insist that the author reveal the board affiliation either in the acknowledgments or in a note in the paper; the exact placement is usually dictated by the journal's style guide and is consistent among papers. This consistency helps the reader know where to look for information about conflicts of interest.

**Monica M Bradford**  
Managing Editor, *Science*  
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The reviewer (let's call her reviewer 1) should notify the journal but should also clearly state whether she believes that there is evidence of inappropriate bias in the paper. Her discovery is bound to affect her review to some extent, if only to make her more careful to confirm that the authors' conclusions are firmly grounded in the evidence presented in the paper. That is not a bad thing. Whether it affects the rest of the review process will depend on whether the editor considers (in part on the basis of reviewer 1's comments) that there is evidence of bias. The editor should not rule out seeking additional advice on the paper or asking the other reviewers to have a second look on the basis of reviewer 1's comments. But the decision should be made on the merits of the case, not on a presumption of impropriety based on an author's failure to disclose a conflict.

The answer to the final question depends on whether the journal already has a mechanism for the disclosure of potential conflicts of interest. If not, it would be inappropriate to single out one author for special treatment. *Nature* does not have a disclosure policy, but later this year we will start asking authors to declare their financial interest, if any, in the research they submit for publication. If the events described above happens to a *Nature* editor once our new policy is in place and if the paper was accepted for publication, the editor will invite the author to declare the financial interest. If that author chooses not to make a declaration, we will publish the paper with a note saying that no declaration had been made.

**Laura Garwin**  
North American Editor, *Nature*  
Washington DC

The study may be straightforward and legitimate. The authors' analysis may justify raising prices to consumers in the

laudable interest of reducing consumption of a finite resource, whose costs would be expected to rise by the principles of market economics. But if the authors believe that the study design and the inferences drawn from them support the paper's conclusions, why not mention the affiliation of one of the authors with that board of directors?

One wonders what caused the reviewer to look at the committee's Web site in the first place. Maybe the paper's analysis seemed too weak to suggest the authors' conclusions. Watching for and questioning conclusions that could support changes with financial or other benefits to the authors may seem to stretch the role of reviewers—although conscientious reviewers who do bother to check out suspiciously biased recommendations deserve our gratitude.

Once a reviewer has uncovered an apparent conflict of interest like this one, the editor should hear about it. If the reviewers decide that the study is sound, the editor might inform the authors that the paper will be accepted with the addition of a footnote giving the author's affiliation with the natural-gas marketing association. If the paper is unacceptable for reasons other than the failure to mention that affiliation, the editor might add a sentence to the rejection letter that states the journal's policy on full disclosure.

**Martha H Brookes**

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## **New Question: A Question of Missing Acknowledgment**

As a freelance editor assigned by an independent author to abbreviate an article, you manage to do so effectively, particularly given a peer reviewer's request to delete acknowledgments to save space. You understand, however, that it is generally a good policy to include acknowledgments and especially not to delete existing ones. One particular acknowledgment is of someone for assistance with preparation of an illustration, which you believe might even require copyright permission. Where might you obtain advice for the author on how to proceed with publication of the article and any necessary documentation?

The situations described as new questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Department of Medical Editing, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94712-3429. Telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail [della.mundy@kp.org](mailto:della.mundy@kp.org).