

Conflicting Interests

Most people might suspect a conflict of interest when a researcher earns royalties from the sale of products supported by his or her research. But conflicts of interest are not always financial, nor are they limited to authors. The other ethical predicaments can also pose problems for reviewers and editors. What are journals doing to manage conflicts of interest and ensure that the information they publish is without bias?

Two of the following articles explore potential conflicts of interest in science and science publishing and examine the policies journals have developed to control those conflicts. The third looks at another potential source of bias in published research reports: the influence of a journal's parent association.

Krimsky S, Rothenberg LS. Conflict of interest policies in science and medical journals: editorial practices and author disclosures. *Sci Eng Ethics* 2001;7:201-18.

Krimsky and Rothenberg examined 1396 highly ranked scientific and biomedical journals to discover how many had adopted policies addressing author conflicts of interest and whether these policies increased disclosure. In 1997, when data were collected, about 16% of journals had conflict-of-interest policies. But less than 1% of articles in these journals disclosed any conflicts of interest. Krimsky and Rothenberg attribute that to author noncompliance and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of two types of disclosure policies. Many journals use a general policy that asks authors to disclose any potential conflicts of interest voluntarily; a few require authors to complete a standardized conflict-of-interest form. The standardized forms increase compliance but often sacrifice detail about the nature of the conflict. Although more journals have added policies since 1997, the study reported in this article remains one of the most thorough investigations into the conflict-of-interest policies of scientific and medical journals.

Kolfschooten F van. Conflict of interest: can you believe what you

read? *Nature* 2002;416:360-3.

A 2002 letter from the Center for Science in the Public Interest urged journals to strengthen their policies for disclosing conflicts of interest. This feature article, in response to the letter, explores the varied approaches that journals have taken in developing conflict-of-interest policies for authors, referees, and editors. Kolfschooten reviews research on conflict of interest in science and calls for additional research to determine which approaches manage conflicting interests most effectively. A table that summarizes the disclosure policies at seven leading journals is particularly useful. The author also quotes many journal editors, such as *Science's* Donald Kennedy, *Nature's* Phillip Campbell, and the *Journal of the American Medical Association's* Catherine DeAngelis. Also quoted is Martin Blume, editor-in-chief of the American Physical Society, which publishes *Physical Reviews*, *Physical Review Letters*, and *Reviews of Modern Physics*. Their comments provide many perspectives and make for an interesting read.

Davis RM, Mullner M. Editorial independence at medical journals owned by professional associations: a survey of editors. *Sci Eng Ethics* 2002;8:513-28.

Sometimes even a journal's hiring and firing practices can create conflicting interests for editors. For example, editors with no specific term of office may be reluctant to make controversial editorial decisions for fear that their editorship will be terminated early. Davis and Mullner surveyed editors of 33 medical journals owned by not-for-profit organizations to explore the degree of perceived editorial independence. Although most journals in the study appeared to have maintained editorial independence, 30% of the editors reported less than complete freedom. A substantial minority also reported having been pressured by the parent association about editorial content. The authors argue for stronger safeguards to ensure editorial independence, such as posting an official association policy or establishing a set editorial term of at least 5 years.

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