

## Conflicts of Interest in Advertising and Sponsorship

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Speakers:

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**Elizabeth Wager**  
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Michael Vasko reviewed literature on the sponsorship of clinical trials and on awareness among investigators and researchers about conflicts of interest (COIs). This literature<sup>1-5</sup> is found primarily in prominent medical journals.

He then addressed how editors have responded to the need to define COI for all participating parties (editors, authors, reviewers, and third parties). The World Association of Medical Editors COI policy served as an example ([www.wame.org/resources/publication-ethics-policies-for-medical-journals](http://www.wame.org/resources/publication-ethics-policies-for-medical-journals)). He pointed out similarities between that policy and those of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) ([www.icmje.org](http://www.icmje.org)) and the Council of Science Editors ([www.councilscienceeditors.org/editorial\\_policies/white\\_paper.cfm](http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/editorial_policies/white_paper.cfm)).

Vasko reviewed policies found in COI forms used by leading medical journals. Especially noteworthy were disclosure statements of JAMA, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, and *The Lancet*.

The discussion turned to COI management, beginning with ensuring that policies are publicly available to authors, that disclosures are collected and assessed before decisions are made, that editors remind authors during the evaluation process about the need for full disclosure, and that editors publish both relevant disclosures and affirmations that no COIs exist for content that has been accepted. He emphasized that editors should investigate failures to disclose potential COIs and then take appropriate action.

Vasko concluded with the types of questions that editors should ask clinical-trial researchers who are employees of the sponsor or who receive industry funding. A useful resource is "Reporting Financial Conflicts of Interest and Relationships Between Investigators and Research Sponsors", by DeAngelis, Fontanarosa, and Flanagin.<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth Wager addressed problems regarding ghostwriting and undisclosed sources of funding. Ghostwriting, or ghost authorship, entails a failure to disclose contributions that would ordinarily meet ICMJE criteria for authorship. The European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) considers it to be dishonest and therefore unacceptable. Ghostwriters would include statisticians who oversee data analysis for a project. All who contribute in that way should at least be listed as contributors. Wager emphasized that writers are commonly needed because physicians tend to be poor writers.

The second problem concerned undisclosed sources of funding as COIs. CSE states that all authors should disclose all funding. Under EMWA guidelines, there should be no vague acknowledgments, especially of sources of funding.

Peter Banks began with the assertion that major changes are taking place in pharmaceutical marketing. Traditional journal display advertising accounts for a smaller percentage of drug companies' total marketing expenditures than in the past, as marketers look for new approaches, including sponsor-supported journal supplements, inserts, reprint collections, pullout posters, e-mail

alerts, Web casts, podcasts, and a variety of additional techniques.

Those approaches give rise to unanticipated problems with respect to COI. Banks asserted that the presence of traditional display advertising does not inherently compromise editorial content and that guidelines used to regulate traditional advertising can be adapted to new media. In new media as well as old, advertising and editorial matter must be clearly distinguished; marketing messages must be consistent with applicable laws, regulations, and society ethical standards; and content must not be disclosed in advance to sponsors.

Banks rejected the view of the Public Library of Science that advertising always compromises editorial integrity. Prohibiting advertising would drive subscription prices to unsustainable levels, he said, making journals dependent on funding from government agencies. The intrusion of government into publishing would subject it to political influence and manipulation and introduce a new and difficult-to-control type of conflict. 🔥

### References

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