

Conflict of Interest in Disclosures and Advertising

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Uncovering the secrets of nature and making a profit are distinct motivations for conducting and reporting research. The conflict that sometimes exists between the two can lead to such unwelcome practices as untruthful drug advertisements and biased research.

Quoting from the *Code of Federal Regulations*, John Komacko described the rules that pharmaceutical companies must follow in their ads. Ads must not be false or misleading. In particular, they must not suggest that a drug has more advantages than have been substantiated by scientifically rigorous studies. In addition, ads must balance claims of effectiveness with safety information.

The actual advertising practices of scholarly medical journals were presented by

Richard W Newman. Relying on several studies, Newman concluded that information contained in ads is often unreliable¹ and unverified.² Perhaps more alarming was the evidence that advertisement and scientific content are not independent: "The strong relatedness between the content of the articles and advertisements placed in three of seven journals and explicit placement of the advertisements face to face or overleaf the related research articles support the hypothesis that journal content is manipulated to place more emphasis on the advertisements."³ Precautions taken by Newman's journal, the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, in response to those problems include a thorough review of ads, clear ad labeling, and a strong separation between editorial and publishing operations.

JAMA's policies are in line with International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) rules⁴ as described in the slides of Michael Vasko (who could not attend but whose slides were presented by Patricia Baskin). ICMJE's rules state that journals should have clear policies regarding advertising that are enforced by editors. The policies should ensure that promotional and nonpromotional materials be easily distinguishable and that ad placement not be related to scientific content.

Advertisers may compromise accuracy or try to manipulate content, but at least there is no ambiguity regarding their motivation: they are driven by profit. The situation is different for authors of scientific articles. Commonly assumed to be objective seekers of truth, authors can nevertheless be affected by financial considerations, and such potential influences on research should be made known to editors and readers.

Evaluation of possible bias in a research article begins with identification of the people involved. According to ICMJE, an author is someone who participated in all of the following: study design, data acquisi-

tion, or interpretation of results; drafting or substantial revision of the manuscript; and approval of the final version. Requiring involvement in all stages, however, seems to address the question of who *deserves* to be an author more than the question of who *could have* influenced content. That view is shared by Baskin, managing editor of *Neurology*, who explained that at her journal it is enough to contribute to *any* of the components listed above to qualify as an author. This is important for ensuring that anyone who can significantly affect a study reports on potential conflicts of interest. At *Neurology*, authors complete a detailed form on which they are required to disclose financial relationships and to list all organizations that supported their study. Disclosures are published with articles, and readers can decide for themselves whether a bias exists.

The authoritative clout of scholarly journals depends on researchers, editors, and pharmaceutical companies. All should commit to reducing the possibility of disseminating wrong or misleading information and to achieving transparency where conflicts of interest exist, be they in sponsored ads or in research articles. 

References

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