Disclosing Conflicts of Interest to Maintain Ethical Integrity

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Throughout the year, I receive questions from our Editorial Board members, reviewers, and authors about conflict of interest (COI) and disclosure—what it means, how comprehensive it should be, and how it impacts the validity of a study. Concerns arise on many fronts, from the impartiality (or lack thereof) of authors who submit a study about a product in which they are somehow invested to the role of industry sponsorship in the supplements we publish periodically as a companion to the main journal. This topic certainly warrants further discussion because the COI inherent in any kind of academic study can impact our ability to write, review, edit, and read the results without bias. However, if the potential predispositions are clearly outlined from the start, we can weigh their impact against the science itself and arrive at a fair conclusion about each article.

**WHAT EXACTLY IS A CONFLICT OF INTEREST?**

First of all, allow me to define COI as it pertains to academic publishing. The World Association of Medical Editors (WAME), in its policy statement titled “Conflict of Interest in Peer Reviewed Medical Journals,” says the following: “In the context of medical publishing, COI exists when a participant in the publication process (author, peer reviewer, or editor) has a competing interest that could unduly influence (or be reasonably seen to do so) his or her responsibilities in the publication process. Among those responsibilities are academic honesty, unbiased conduct and reporting of research, and integrity of decisions or judgments.”1 Although we most commonly think of COI as being financial, “competing interests” can also mean academic affiliations (ie, an editor is in the author’s department and, despite the peer review process being blind, recognizes his or her colleague’s work) or professional beliefs (ie, a reviewer passionately believes that his or her method of open rhinoplasty is superior to the author’s description of a closed technique and therefore would not evaluate the results impartially).

With respect to financial COI, the ties can be direct or indirect. If an author is a paid or unpaid investigator, a member of the speakers bureau, or a stockholder in the company whose product is being described in his or her article, there is a direct financial COI. Likewise, a reviewer or editor who is a beneficiary of the company (or, conversely, a competing company) would have a direct COI for that particular article. Indirect financial COI arise when an author, reviewer, or member of the editorial committee received previous financial support from a company, hopes to secure future financial support from that company, or is involved with a peripheral company that may benefit from subsequent support of or detraction from the featured company’s product.

This is certainly not to say that every COI truly impacts the validity of a publication. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICJME) cautions us that the “ties” described above “vary from being negligible to having great potential for influencing judgment” and that “not all relationships represent true conflict of interest.”2

**SO, WHY DO I NEED TO DISCLOSE?**

Disclosure, of course, refers to the transparent confession of relationships, ties, and affiliations in the public forum. Any of you who know me personally are well aware of my commitment to transparency throughout my professional life, not least with *Aesthetic Surgery Journal* (ASJ). In our business, even the appearance of impropriety is tantamount to impropriety itself, so it is important to me that everyone involved with the *Journal* err on the side of providing too much information, rather than too little. The ICJME policy statement supports this stance, saying, “The potential for conflict of interest can exist regardless of whether an individual believes that the relationship affects his or her scientific judgment,”2 and WAME agrees: “The appearance of COI, even where none actually exists, can also erode trust in a journal by damaging its reputation and credibility.”1 It is of the utmost

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importance to me that our readers, authors, and reviewers be able to trust the integrity of the articles published between our gold covers; it is for this reason that ASJ has a clear and stringent disclosure policy.

**WHAT DO I NEED TO DISCLOSE?**

When submitting a paper to the *Journal*, authors are queried about COI and disclosure issues at several junctures. First, when entering the “metadata” about the paper (ie, title, author list, keywords), the corresponding author is asked whether any of the authors have any disclosures to make. The author selects “Yes” or “No” from a dropdown box; if “Yes” is selected, the author is asked to provide further information about the potential COI. Authors must also provide full affiliation, disclosure, and funding information on the title page of the manuscript.

Although the peer review process at ASJ is blind—meaning that reviewers have no access to the names or affiliations of the authors—reviewers are also asked whether they have any conflicts that might compromise their ability to be impartial in evaluating an assigned manuscript. As Editor-in-Chief, I make every effort to ensure that reviewers who are affiliated with the same academic institution as the authors are not invited to submit comments, but reviewers are asked to recuse themselves if they are able to recognize the authors from the research topic, if they have a philosophical conflict with the author’s technique, or if they have financial interest in any product mentioned in the text.

In short, all members of the peer review process should disclose the following:

- Stockholdings with any company in the aesthetic industry, whether relevant to the article’s topic or not
- Paid or unpaid consultant positions with any company in the aesthetic industry (past and current)
- Positions on the speakers bureau for any company in the aesthetic industry (past and current)
- Affiliations with any academic institution and/or information about the location of each author’s private practice
- Detailed funding information for the study described in the manuscript, including how the stipends were spent
- Any other current or historical information that might affect the authors’ motivation for publishing or the reviewers’ motivation for commenting upon any manuscript submitted to ASJ

SUPPLEMENTS AND COI

I’m also often asked about the “ethics” of sponsored supplements. These single-subject inserts are included once or twice a year with your regular issues of ASJ; last year, we distributed a supplement on nonsurgical facial rejuvenation produced by Global Academy for Medical Education, LLC, and funded by a grant from sanofi-aventis. Although I can understand the opinion of some colleagues that these funded studies provide partisan data under the guise of impartial science, I respectfully disagree. Information about sponsorship is clearly disclosed on the cover of each supplement and again within the first two pages. Furthermore, I have worked with Sage (our publisher) to develop a stringent policy for these supplements, wherein final approval of any content lies in the hands of our Editorial Office. The articles undergo the same rigorous peer review as any other manuscript submitted to the *Journal*, and each supplement has a Guest Editor with no affiliation to the sponsoring company. The purpose of the funding is to allow us to distribute information about a particular theme or topic in one neat package; it is certainly not to provide a platform for industry to bypass the peer review process.

The National Library of Medicine (NLM), which oversees citations in MEDLINE, has a clear policy on supplements, as well. According to their criteria, “Supplements will be cited and indexed for MEDLINE only if certain conditions are met.” Among other things, “The disclosure information must be specific and address any financial relationship the guest editors and authors have with the sponsoring organization and any interests that organization represents, as well as with any for-profit product discussed or implied in the supplement and/or individual articles.”1 I am happy to report that all of our supplements published since ASJ was accepted for indexing in 2008 have been cited in MEDLINE.

CURRENT PRACTICES

Because there are no standard regulations in the scientific community outlining required disclosure criteria, there is a vast discrepancy in terms of policy among journals. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* in 2009 found that only 89% of the 256 journals studied had any COI policy whatsoever for their authors. The abstract summarized the results thus: “Fifty-four percent of the 256 journals studied had any COI policy whatsoever for their authors. The abstract summarized the results thus: “Fifty-four percent required authors to sign a disclosure statement, and 77% provided definitions of COI. Most definitions were limited to direct financial relationships; a minority of journals requested disclosure of other potential conflicts such as personal relationships (42%), paid expert testimony (42%), relationships with other organizations (26%), or travel grants (12%).”1 This is one instance where I am proud to say that ASJ is in the minority; in the Information for Authors on our website, we provide a robust definition of COI that covers many of those bases. As a result of the study findings, I plan to make our policy even more clear.

Much of the recent attention paid to COI and disclosure issues stems from an article by Duff Wilson published in
the New York Times Business Day in September 2010, in which he quoted a study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine.⁵ That study investigated the failure of many authors, journals, and publishers to appropriately disclose industry payments in related articles printed in the orthopedic literature. The authors of the study found that, of a total of $250 million paid by medical device companies for research in 2007, $114 million was distributed to 41 doctors. Of those doctors, 32 were credited with authorship on a paper, and 54% did not mention their financial relationship with the company.

This is clearly a question of ethics, one which I think we can all agree deserves our attention. Our reputation as physicians, as authors, and as people of integrity is at stake. I am asking for your help—whether you are a loyal reader of ASJ, a frequent reviewer, a hopeful author, or a member of our distinguished Board—to make sure that we remain ahead of the curve in terms of transparency. Only with your cooperation can we succeed in that effort!

Disclosures

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

REFERENCES