Editorial

Conflicts of interest/transparency declarations: new policy

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Introduction

We believe that it is important for readers of JAC to be made aware of any interests of authors that could be perceived as having influenced the views they have expressed. Only when appropriately informed can readers make a judgment regarding the potential for interests to influence a particular article.

There are many journals that stipulate that authors declare their conflicts of interest. Indeed, for some time our ‘Instructions to Authors’ have stated that any conflicting interests should be disclosed. However, although increasing numbers of authors have been providing this information, not all authors have done so, and it is not something that we have either strictly enforced or provided detailed guidance on.

In a change to Journal policy and in the interests of openness, we are now stipulating that all papers must include transparency declarations. This decision has been made following discussions with the Editorial Board and the Editors of JAC, combined with the Guidelines on Good Publication Practice published by the Committee of Publication Ethics (COPE). The term ‘conflicts of interest’ has negative undertones, seeming to imply that these are something we should automatically be uneasy about disclosing. However, this should not be the case, and that is why we propose to use the term transparency declarations. If authors have acted honourably, there should be no reason to conceal this information. Readers must not assume that declared potential conflicts of interest indicate that an article’s findings must be flawed; all articles must be judged on their content. Prejudice is as bad as concealment.

The Journal believes that readers of JAC should be as informed as possible. For example, papers published in JAC that have undergone an unusual review procedure compared with normal have included sections that highlight and explain the modified editorial process. Examples are the Working Party report concerning genetically modified plants and more recently a series of papers by Magee and Huovinen.

Funding

It is important that readers should be informed about who has funded particular research, as well as the role, if any, of the funders in the research. This information must always be included and should be disclosed in the ‘Acknowledgements’ section. In addition, ongoing support for any of the authors should also be stated.

What should be included in the transparency declarations?

This is a question that each author must carefully consider. It is perhaps human nature to believe that we have no conflicts of interest when in reality, and if thought about carefully, we probably do; hence transparency should be everyone’s objective. According to COPE, conflicts of interest are ‘described as those which, when revealed later, would make a reasonable reader feel misled or deceived’. Although conflicts of interest can be religious, personal, political, academic or financial, we suggest authors concentrate on transparency declarations of a financial nature, although relevant non-financial disclosures can also be made. Authors should consider making a declaration if they answer ‘Yes’ to either of the following questions:

1. Have you in the period of research leading up to this publication accepted any of the following from an organization (including government departments or granting bodies) that may in any way be financially affected by the conclusions of your article, e.g. reimbursement for attending a symposium, a fee for speaking, a consultancy fee, funds for research other than directly for this work, funds for a member of staff, any other substantial material benefit?
2. Do you directly own any stocks or shares in a company that might be financially affected by the conclusions of your article?

The ‘Transparency declarations’ section should appear after the ‘Acknowledgements’ section. Authors should either include appropriate declarations or state ‘None to declare’. Importantly, the declarations should be kept as concise as possible, should avoid giving financial details (e.g. sums received, numbers of shares owned, etc.), and should be restricted to declarations that are specific to the paper in question. Authors will of course need to consider whether or not the transparency declarations need to be amended when revisions are submitted. A suitable declaration might be as follows:

‘CD has received funds for speaking at symposia organized on behalf of Panacea Ltd and has also received funds for research from Panacea. CD is a member of the Panacea advisory board for fantastazole.’

The burden of responsibility rests with all authors, who must ensure that appropriate declarations are included. The
corresponding author will be responsible for obtaining the relevant information from all of their co-authors. By signing a submission form, each author is stating that they have made any necessary transparency declaration.

Editor-in-Chief, Editors and Referees

We are very aware that it is not only authors who can be influenced by financial and other interests. Editors and referees are asked to consider whether they have any conflicts of interest when they are assigned a paper to review, and if necessary to decline to review the paper.

In addition, the Editor-in-Chief and Editors also register their interests (including personal and business interests) with the BSAC. The BSAC Register of Interests is held at BSAC Headquarters, is updated periodically and is available for inspection.

Time frame

All papers submitted from January 2006 onwards must include a transparency declarations section; papers that do not include such a section will not enter the review process; they will be returned to the corresponding author so that the appropriate section can be added. Following resubmission, the paper will then progress to peer review.

From now until January, authors will be encouraged to include transparency declarations, both on submission and at the revision decision stage. Failure to include a transparency declaration section will result in the following statement appearing in the event of publication: ‘No declarations were made by the author(s) of this paper’. Authors will have one last chance to amend this statement at the proof stage.

The relevant screen of the online submission system has been updated so that it now prompts authors to include transparency declarations, and our standard submission form has also been updated. These measures, together with this Editorial and updated instructions to authors (http://www.oxfordjournals.org/jnls/list/jac/instauth/), should mean that all authors are aware of this new policy.

Summary

All papers submitted to JAC must include a ‘Transparency declarations’ section; this will become mandatory from January 2006. It is the responsibility of each author to ensure that an accurate declaration is included in every paper. Authors should concentrate on disclosing financial interests although relevant non-financial disclosures can also be made. All authors should carefully consider the embarrassment and potential damage to their reputation that could result should they fail to declare an interest that is revealed subsequently. Importantly, we do not see these declarations as being negative, but an essential component of modern research publications.

References