What we mean when we talk about “conflict of interest”

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In the 1970s, partly stimulated by the infusion of money from the National Institute of Health (NIH) and the rapid rise in the number of faculty members in US medical schools, the volume of biomedical publications also increased dramatically. Pressure to publish results also increased, partly to help investigators with promotion but also to improve their chances for additional funding from NIH or other sources. Any time money and pressure to obtain more of it exist there are opportunities to stretch the boundaries of ethics, creating problems ranging from outright fraudulent research to taking credit where credit exists only in the eyes of the one taking it.

Starting in the early 1980s, a number of highly publicized examples of fraudulent research and lack of accountability by senior authors for fraudulent work done by others increased the scrutiny of biomedical research by journal editors. Senior investigators who had “lent” their name to junior investigators tried to use the Exxon excuse: “I can’t know everything that goes on in my lab.”

But guidelines have now changed in the biomedical publishing world. All authors are required to adhere to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) definition of author participation (see guidelines for authors www.icmje.org/) Many journals also began to publish retractions of articles called into question by further research or academic whistle blowers. Editors and editorial boards of journals and reviewers have a responsibility to protect the public, as much as possible, from fraudulent or improperly reported research.

In recent years, a different type of problem has arisen. The National Library of Medicine and the ICMJE have worked to design a conflict of interest statement that at first was suggested and soon will be required of indexed biomedical journals identifying all possible sources of external bias in material published in journals. The most important aspect of these changes is that the reader, not the author, must be the one who is able to determine possible conflicts of interest. The operative word is possible since sources of outside revenue are not, in and of themselves, conflicts of interest but can and do alert the reader of medical journals about the potential for author bias.

Industry-sponsored research is a major funder for research-intensive institutions. While the majority of authors base their work on science and rigorous standards for research, support for their work, beyond their institutional support, must be acknowledged. The public press has increased its scrutiny of recommendations, clinical guidelines, and research reports from authors who are paid consultants or speakers for pharmaceutical or medical device companies. An article in the March 21, 2007 New York Times about payments to physicians in Minnesota raised the issue of articles and clinical guideline development written by authors who are heavily supported through Pharma.

Due to all of these things, the policy on conflict of interest for the Wisconsin Medical Journal asks all authors listed in manuscripts submitted to the Journal to list any outside sources of revenue as well as any funding support when articles are submitted for review. These will be placed at the end of the article. This approach has been adopted by all major peer reviewed biomedical journals, which list acknowledgments, funding sources, and either “competing interests” or “financial disclosure.”

The goal of our policy, as well as that of other peer reviewed biomedical journals, is to help the reader, who is the primary reason for a journal’s existence, be as informed as possible when making decisions based on the content of an article. It is through the readers that the public is served—as their doctors, teachers, or leaders—and it is the public who will ultimately benefit from the transparency now required in the medical literature.
The mission of the Wisconsin Medical Journal is to provide a vehicle for professional communication and continuing education of Wisconsin physicians.

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