

Conflicts of interest in scholarly communication: what is it and how to avoid it?

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The journals often require disclosure of the conflicts of interest from all the stakeholders involved in the peer review and editorial process. The international committee of medical journal editors (ICMJE) defines conflicts of interest as "*The potential for conflict of interest and bias exists when professional judgment concerning a primary interest (such as patients' welfare or the validity of research) may be influenced by a secondary interest (such as financial gain)*" [1]. Another definition states, "*A conflict of interest is a set of circumstances that creates a risk that professional judgment or actions regarding a primary interest will be unduly influenced by a secondary interest*" [2]. It is a situation where the same individual is involved with two competing interests, one of which may involve unethical motivation or benefit or financial interest. Therefore, the COI involves a real, apparent, or potential violation of the trust that others have in the process being conducted or in the researchers participating in the research. Although conflicts of interest (COI) are not new in biomedical research, it was rarely reported until the late 90s, when serious reports of linkage between private companies and academic institutions [3]. It gained more attention with the increasing number of sponsored research on commercial applications leading to doubt about how sponsorship or partial financial support affects the research outcome.

The COI is a significant concern for biomedical and pharmaceutical journals. The organizations such as the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, the World Association of Medical Editors and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) have launched initiatives to establish international standards for Conflict of Interest (COI) disclosure. COPE requires its member journals to comply with its Code of Conduct for Journal Editors. Although these initiatives helped a lot to improve the situation, there is still a lack of awareness and understanding of COI, especially among budding researchers.

Identifying the conflicts of interest

Generally, the COIs may be financial/tangible or nonfinancial/intangible, and they may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The fee paid by an organization, commercial or not-for-profit, for a service, consultancy, membership, speaking or registration for some event, etc., may be considered the direct COI. This includes direct funding/financial support from an organization that may have some interest in the research outcome.
- The indirect or intangible conflicts may include all kinds of indirect payments like reimbursement of travel expenses, sponsored trips, accommodations & hospitality or the payment for professional development.
- Royalties or stakes from the beneficiaries or the personal relationship with the beneficiaries constitute the COI.
- Academician accepts a post in a company that may be interested in influencing government or institutional policies.
- The academician holds a position on the journal's editorial board and has the authority in their institute to recommend a subscription or select a journal for submission on behalf of junior colleges or students.

Conflicts of interest also exist during the editorial and peer-review process, starting with the editorial assignment and peer-reviewers selection. Journal editors must be cautious about competing interests before accepting editorial assignments. Similar care must be taken while selecting the peer reviewers. The potential COI for journal editors and reviewers may include but is not limited to the following:

- The manuscript's authors recently co-authored a publication with the editor/reviewers.
- The editor or the peer-reviewers are working with the author either in the same institute or in a multi-institutional/multinational research group or holding a position/having relationship that may influence their role as editor or the peer-review.
- Receiving similar sponsorship (as of authors) or any other benefits by a commercial or not-for-profit organization that may have any interest in the research outcome or influence their scientific decision as the editor or as a peer-reviewer.

Reporting a conflict of interest

The COI is not necessarily considered misconduct; however, it increases the chance of bias in the editorial process. The authors are expected to disclose potential conflicts of interest during submission. The ICMJE has developed a uniform COI disclosure form which covers almost all the possible aspects of potential conflicts. The member journals and the journals claiming to follow the ICMJE recommendations are expected to ask the authors to submit this form during the submission of their manuscripts. Most legitimate publishers have similar arrangements for the editors and the reviewers, either in an electronic or offline format. The authors, editors and peer reviewers must disclose all possible competing interests and relationships to the journal editor and the publishers.

Handling of conflicts of interest at journal/publisher level

Although each publisher may have its unique mechanisms to deal with COIs, it is always advisable for journal editors to follow the COPE flowcharts to deal with suspected conflicts of interest. These flow charts are divided into two parts: the editors or peer-reviewers identified the 'Undisclosed conflict of interest in a submitted manuscript' [4] and the undisclosed COI identified in the published article [5].

Transparency is the core of the ethical editorial and peer-review process, as well as in scientific research. Editors, publishers, reviewers, and authors are all expected to be transparent about the competing interest to avoid any bias in the entire publication process for scholarly communication.

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