

Competing interest

Competing interest, or conflict of interest, has become a priority topic in many areas of professional and public life. It is also an important source of potential bias in the publication of scientific papers. A competing interest can have an effect at various stages of the decision making process, from the author to the peer reviewer or the editorial staff.

According to the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors conflict of interest occurs 'when a participant in the peer review and publication process—author, reviewer, or editor—has ties to activities that could inappropriately influence his or her judgment, whether or not judgment is in fact affected'.^{1,2} An important concept in this definition is that someone with a potential competing interest is not best placed to judge whether or not the competing interest has affected his or her judgement. In the production of a scientific journal it is therefore important to make declaring a potential competing interest an open process. This will develop and maintain public trust in the credibility of the outcomes of published papers. Failure to ensure this could ultimately lead to the promotion of clinical management that may not be in the best interest of patients. Discovery of an undisclosed potential competing interest could have a detrimental affect on the reputations of institutions, individual professionals, journal staff and the journal itself.

With this in mind the Editorial Advisory Board of the Journal made it a priority to establish a policy for the management of competing interest by the Journal. The Editorial Advisory Board (EAB) decided to adopt the term 'competing interest' as it avoids any implication of wrongdoing. A small working party was established to prepare a working paper on competing interest. From this

paper the Editorial Advisory Board has developed a policy for the management of competing interest, which is published in this issue of the Journal (page 129).

From now on all authors, peer reviewers and Editorial Advisory Board members will be sent a new and more detailed declaration form on competing interest. From October onwards, relevant potential competing interests of authors will be published for all aspects of the Journal e.g. editorials, articles, personal views, reviews and correspondence. Peer reviewers will be requested to discuss with the Editor if they feel they have a relevant competing interest. If this is confirmed, then the paper will be sent to an alternative peer reviewer. The Editor and Editorial Advisory Board members will withdraw from making editorial decisions on any items for publication where their competing interest could bias for or against publication.

I am unsure how well this will work in practice. In our small specialty the competing interest of personal and professional relationships means that total impartiality is even more difficult and the decision on what is 'major' or 'relevant' may not always be clear. It is only by starting somewhere and evaluating the experience that we can evolve an effective policy. The process will therefore be kept under review with the help and feedback from all participants. Correspondence on the subject of competing interest is welcome.

Details of the current peer review process adopted by the Journal will be published in the October issue.

Fran Reader, *Honorary Editor*

References:

- 1 International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform requirements for manuscript submitted to biomedical journals. *Ann Intern Med* 1997; **126**: 36–47.
- 2 Last update May 2000 <http://wame.org/journals/resource/unifreq.htm>