

McCarthyism, conflict of interest and *Addiction's* new transparency declaration procedures

The process of submitting a manuscript to a scientific journal for editorial review has become increasingly bureaucratic. This has partly resulted from the reaction by journal editors to threats to the integrity of science from commercial interests. This editorial describes instances involving Addiction and is aimed at helping to raise awareness of the kinds of issues that arise. It also announces Addiction's adoption of the International Society of Addiction Journal Editors (ISAJE) transparency form.

Over the past few years the broader fields of biomedical science and scientific publishing have been rocked by scandals involving research funded by the pharmaceutical industry [1], and there have been disturbing revelations from secret industry documents showing how major producers of tobacco products manipulated scientists and distorted reporting of scientific findings [2]. Some of the tobacco controversies have unfolded in the pages of this journal.

In one example, our book review editor had reason to suspect that the tobacco industry had paid two academics to compile a volume that purported to show that nicotine was not addictive, without declaring this information to the reader or to the editor who was asked to review the book [3].

In another instance, a young investigator who had received funding from the Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling did not acknowledge that this organization was funded by the gambling industry and therefore in need of disclosure. The investigator reported that she had no idea that the Institute's funding came from the gambling industry, probably because a consortium of Las Vegas casinos transfers money to the National Center for Responsible Gaming (NCRG), which in turn funds the Institute, which in turn funds investigators. To check the extent of disclosure in the field of gambling research, we recently reviewed 30 papers selected randomly from the NCRG's Research Library, a database of more than 170 peer-reviewed papers resulting from NCRG-funded research on gambling disorders. Of the 30 studies, only one [4] declared the NCRG affiliation in its Conflict of Interest statement, and fewer than half (48%) cited funding from NCRG in the Acknowledgement section or in a footnote of the paper.

More recently, the editors of *Addiction* had an extensive interchange with the authors of a paper published in *Addiction* [5] arising from the fact that one of the

co-authors had not indicated in our standard COI form that he had served as a senior consultant to the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP), an organization funded by the major international alcohol producers. The authors argued that the ICAP connection was not relevant to the topic of their research (alcohol expectancies in Chinese schoolchildren), despite the fact that the author concerned was speaking at industry-sponsored conferences in China on the subject of alcohol marketing guidelines designed to protect vulnerable populations, and despite the fact that our declaration instructions stated 'irrespective of the present article'.

Another recent case involved two authors and their associations with alcohol industry bodies [6,7]. A check of the organizations with which the authors were involved revealed a convoluted set of financial connections among the International Scientific Forum for Alcohol Research (ISFAR), a 'joint venture' between Boston University's Institute on Lifestyle and Health and Alcohol in Moderation (AIM) and the alcohol industry. There were further connections with The Renaud Society, described on its website as an 'International Society of Medical Professionals with an Interest in Better Health and a Passion for Wine'. In both cases, the authors did not consider these relationships as meeting the requirements of our declarations of interest policy. The Renaud Society holds regular conferences focused on the purported health benefits of wine. Sponsors are not declared on their website, and some of the speakers (including the aforementioned authors) received travel funds to the conferences. However, the authors did not see their membership in a wine appreciation society or the receipt of funds to attend conferences that promote the health benefits of alcohol as being conflicts of interest when submitting commentaries to our journal on the relationship between alcohol consumption and health.

ISFAR commissions reviews of the alcohol and drinking literature from scientists who do not receive remuneration for their essays, although three of the forum members are based at institutions that receive major support from the wine industry and six others receive a small percentage of their support (1–5%) from the beverage industry. The co-director of ISFAR, Dr R. Curtis Ellison, receives unrestricted educational donations from the industry through the Institute on Lifestyle and Health, Boston University School of Medicine, which he directs [8], and the Institute receives about 10% of its funding from the alcohol industry [9–11]. For example,

in 2005, it received a \$50 000 grant from the Brown–Forman Corporation, a producer of wine and spirit brands, and \$25 000 from the Wine Group, Inc. [12]. ISFAR also worked with ICAP to organize a Symposium on Moderate Alcohol Consumption. ISFAR's other co-director serves as the Executive Director of AIM, which receives funding from the alcohol industry via a number of different mechanisms such as subscriptions and project grants [8]. This example of convoluted funding streams presents a challenge to the spirit, if not the letter, of current financial declaration statements in that an individual may claim he or she receives no funds from the industry to conduct one activity while at the same time receiving unrestricted donations from an industry that benefits from that activity.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST DECLARATIONS PROCEDURES

From these examples, one might conclude that declaration policies can be easily circumvented, and that they are perhaps not achieving their major purpose, which is to promote transparency in scientific communications and provide readers with information needed to make an informed evaluation of the merit of an article or opinion piece. Indeed, these objections have been made by a small number of critics in the addiction field [13,14] who have also argued that government funding sources and personal vendettas may be equally important sources of bias. Even if bias exists, it is argued that the peer review process and the constant replication of scientific findings provide ample opportunity to correct any bias.

It is also argued that COI declarations are onerous, unnecessary and stigmatizing, in that they single out authors who accept industry funding and make them appear somehow tainted, often without any supporting evidence. Some have argued that this is a symptom of nascent 'McCarthyism' gripping the field, implying that declaration procedures are the equivalent of unsubstantiated accusations that reflect negatively on the character of honest scientists without proper regard for evidence [13,14].

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF TRANSPARENCY

A key argument in favor of transparency declarations is that even if they cannot capture all sources of bias, they are considerably better than not capturing any. A growing number of studies (ironically made possible in part by COI declaration policies instituted by the major biomedical journals) have found troubling correlations between financial relationships with industry and problems with research, including a tendency for funding

sources to influence study design and hypothesis formulation. Industry funding increases the likelihood that researchers will produce pro-industry conclusions, publish biased interpretations of trial results and even suppress the publication of negative findings [15–37].

In the addiction field, Wallace [28] reported that interpretative bias played a role in the research funded by the tobacco industry claiming a genetic predisposition to lung cancer, and that studies tended to overestimate genetic risk. Barnes & Bero [29] found that review papers funded by the tobacco industry are 88 times more likely than non-industry-funded studies to conclude that passive smoke is not harmful to health.

Beyond the fact that associations have been consistently identified, is there a plausible mechanism to account for the association? Although conflict of interest motivations are difficult to investigate, there is a substantial literature on the psychological mechanisms that influence behavior when a competing interest exists. At an individual level, conflicting interests and biased behavior can be produced by financial considerations, academic–professional ambitions or personal relationships and experiences [30]. Conflicts of interest can further influence behavior by imposing a 'sense of indebtedness', and thereby the obligation to reciprocate [31]. The findings from social science and neuroscience suggest that surrendering to a conflict of interest may often be a result of unintentional bias rather than intentional dishonesty [32].

Another argument in favor of consistent and transparent declaration policies is that they begin to address the damage done by lax or non-existent declaration policies, which have sometimes failed to detect and report competing interests. Over the span of 15 years, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) epidemiologist James Enstrom received more than \$1.4 million in undeclared consulting fees from the tobacco industry, producing research that backed industry views. In 2007, a federal judge cited Enstrom's research in a racketeering case as evidence of the tobacco industry's manipulation of science. Later, a public meeting of the UC Board of Regents called the ethics of his research into question [33]. Dr Enstrom is currently contesting his dismissal from UCLA in 2012 [34,35]. Similarly, a public health researcher from the University of Geneva faced legal proceedings for scientific fraud in three different courts when it was discovered that for several decades he had been secretly paid as a consultant by Philip Morris [36]. Instances such as these raise doubts about the results of scientific research funded directly by industry sources, and can challenge the integrity of the researcher, the institution or even an entire profession.

Another argument in favor of declaration policies is that in the absence of declaration, the possibility exists

that no action will be taken to prevent research bias because we will never know. As for the argument that the peer review process will sort things out eventually, it is not realistic to expect that every study funded by industry sources will be replicated soon enough to prevent the approval of ineffective drugs or to clear up the ambiguity raised by a tobacco industry study claiming that nicotine is not addictive. Further, strategic funding by industries will not simply dry up because others have counterfindings. Sustained support of a research agenda can substantially influence the simple number of papers that support a certain position or research finding, heavily influencing the results of systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

Finally, declaration policies have an educational function. Requiring the declaration of all funding sources and competing interests, COI policies remind researchers that journal editors and their peers take competing interests seriously and that the potential for research bias needs to be monitored.

THE RESPONSE

Since the first conflict-of-interest disclosures appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in the early 1980s, the rationale for including this information in published scientific papers has not changed. Scientific discourse depends upon objectivity. The conduct of science can be influenced by biases introduced by conflicts of interest, whether they are financial, professional, intellectual or fueled by academic competition. The potential for bias is real, whether or not researchers believe those conflicts of interest influence their own conduct. In response to threats to the integrity of science, scientific journals have attempted to improve their COI declaration policies and procedures, following the lead of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors [38], which has developed reporting forms that many journals require authors to use when declaring funding sources and competing interests.

In the addiction field, the International Society of Addiction Journal Editors (ISAJE), representing 42 journals, endorsed a general policy statement called the Common Standard [39] and at its general meeting in 2011 adopted a new procedure designed specifically to document COI information relevant to research on alcohol, tobacco, gambling, pharmaceuticals and a variety of other commercial and non-commercial sources. That statement has now been translated into a simple, four-question declaration form, which has been used on a trial basis by authors submitting manuscripts to *Addiction* since July 2012. The new procedure is more specific about the types of competing interests that should be declared, especially with respect to third-party

organizations supported by the alcohol and gambling industries. It also asks about personal conflicts, and uses a 5-year look-back period to keep the focus on influences that are relatively contemporaneous with the research or other information being reported. Following the trial, *Addiction* has decided to continue to use the ISAJE Transparency Declaration Form indefinitely. We hope that our adoption of this policy will provide the basis for a common standard across all ISAJE member journals.

Declaration of interests

None.

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