

Conflict of Interest

International Committee of
Medical Journal Editors

Conflict of interest for a given manuscript exists when a participant in the peer review and publication process—author, reviewer, and editor—has ties to activities that could inappropriately influence his or her judgment, whether or not judgment is in fact affected. Financial relationships with industry (for example, through employment, consultancies, stock ownership, honoraria, expert testimony), either directly or through immediate family, are usually considered to be the most important conflicts of interest. However, conflicts can occur for other reasons, such as personal relationships, academic competition, and intellectual passion.

Public trust in the peer review process and the credibility of published articles depend in part on how well conflict of interest is handled during writing, peer review, and editorial decision making. Bias can often be identified and eliminated by careful attention to the scientific methods and conclusions of the work. Financial relationships and their effects are less easily detected than other conflicts of interest. Participants in peer review and publication should disclose their conflicting interests, and the information should be made available so that others can judge their effects for themselves. Because readers may be less able to detect bias in review articles and editorials than in reports of original research, some journals do not accept reviews and editorials from authors with a conflict of interest.

Authors

When they submit a manuscript, whether an article or a letter, authors are responsible for recognizing and disclosing financial and other conflicts of interest that might bias their work. They should acknowledge in the manuscript all financial support for the work and other financial or personal connections to the work.

Reviewers

External peer reviewers should disclose to editors any conflicts of interest that could bias their opinions of the manuscript, and they should disqualify themselves from reviewing specific manuscripts if they believe it to be appropriate. The editors must be made aware of reviewers' conflicts of interest to interpret the reviews and judge for themselves whether the reviewer should be disqualified. Reviewers should not use knowledge of the work, before its publication, to further their own interests.

Editors and Staff

Editors who make final decisions about manuscripts should have no personal financial involvement in any of the issues they might judge. Other members of the editorial staff, if they participate in editorial decisions, should provide editors with a current description of their financial interests (as they might relate to editorial judgments) and disqualify themselves from any decisions where they have a conflict of interest. Published articles and letters should include a description of all financial support and any conflict of interest that, in the editors' judgment, readers should know about. Editorial staff should not use the information gained through working with manuscripts for private gain.

Corrections, Retractions, and “Expressions of Concern” about Research Findings

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Editors must assume initially that authors are reporting work based on honest observations. Nevertheless, two types of difficulty may arise.

First, errors may be noted in published

articles that require the publication of a correction or erratum of part of the work. It is conceivable that an error could be so serious as to vitiate the entire body of the work, but this is unlikely and should be handled by editors and authors on an individual basis. Such an error should not be confused with inadequacies exposed by the emergence of new scientific information in the normal course of research. The latter require no corrections or withdrawals.

The second type of difficulty is scientific fraud. If substantial doubts arise about the honesty of work, either submitted or published, it is the editor's responsibility to ensure that the question is appropriately pursued (including possible consultation with the authors). However, it is not the task of editors to conduct a full investigation or to make a determination; that responsibility lies with the institution where the work was done or with the funding agency. The editor should be promptly informed of the final decision, and if a fraudulent paper has been published, the journal must print a retraction. If this method of

investigation does not result in a satisfactory conclusion, the editor may choose to publish an expression of concern with an explanation.

The retraction or expression of concern, so labeled, should appear on a numbered page in a prominent section of the journal, be listed in the contents page, and include in its heading the title of the original article. It should not simply be a letter to the editor. Ideally, the first author should be the same in the retraction as in the article, although under certain circumstances the editor may accept retractions by other responsible people. The text of the retraction should explain why the article is being retracted and include a bibliographic reference to it.

The validity of previous work by the author of a fraudulent paper cannot be assumed. Editors may ask the author's institution to assure them of the validity of earlier work published in their journals or to retract it. If this is not done they may choose to publish an announcement to the effect that the validity of previously published work is not assured.

*Inquires and comments should be sent to The Editor at the São Paulo Medical Journal (Revista Paulista de Medicina) secretariat office,
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Phone +55 11 232 3141, extension 210; fax:+55 11 3107 7979; e-mail: revistas@apm.org.br*

The notes in this statement are excerpts from: International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals. *Ann Intern Med* 1997 Jan 1;126(1):36-47. Available on website: <http://www.acponline.org/journals/01jan97/unifregr.htm>. This article includes: issues to consider before submitting a manuscript, requirements for submission of manuscripts, sending the manuscript to the journal, and separate declarations.