Managing conflicts of interest

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The mission of the *Journal* is to advance excellence and to impact the specialty. We provide high-quality reports that influence patient care worldwide. Because of the impact on surgical treatments, the *Journal* must ensure that the information published is accurate, objective, and free of undue influences. The reviewers and editors are responsible for maintaining the quality of the published papers and the integrity of information they contain. Many authors of important papers submitted to the *Journal* have ties to industry or other obligations that could potentially influence their reports. Industry relations permit many authors to evaluate important innovations and to describe new discoveries. Although these contributions are important for the *Journal*, they increase the potential for biased reports. Conflicts of interest are frequent, but they do not per se imply wrongdoing; rather, impropriety only occurs if the conflicts are not adequately managed and appropriately resolved.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

A conflict of interest exists when the primary interest of the report is unduly influenced by a secondary interest. In a clinical setting, the primary focus of a physician is to serve the welfare of the patients. Secondary interests may include personal financial gain or advantages that are not monetary, such as academic promotion; enhanced reputation; or the advancement of financial interests of a partnership, hospital, or insurance plan. Although all interests may be taken into account, the welfare of patients takes precedence over all other considerations.

In a research setting, the primary obligation of an investigator is to serve the interests of science by designing, executing, and reporting accurate information in an honest, unbiased, and balanced manner. Secondary interests may be similar to those facing a physician in a clinical setting: Personal financial gain, nonmonetary benefits, or financial interests of third parties. Just as physicians must not allow financial gain or other secondary interests to override their obligations to the welfare of their patients,

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so must researchers not allow secondary interests to override their obligations to science; that is, they must not engage in manipulation of data, plagiarism, duplicate publication, and other transgressions against the standards of scientific investigations. In addition, the authors who have any conflicts of interest must maintain an adequate balance and avoid undue claims or unfounded benefits.

MANAGING CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

In clinical care, conflicts of interest must be recognized and resolved in favor of the patient, and, in research, they must be resolved in favor of scientific accuracy. It is the investigator's responsibility to acknowledge conflicts of interest and to resolve them in favor of science, avoiding data manipulation, such as falsification and fabrication, while ensuring balance and absence of bias in reporting study results.

Financial conflicts of interest are not difficult for investigators to recognize, but nonfinancial conflicts may be more subtle. Journals have a responsibility to ensure, to the extent possible, that the reports they publish are accurate and unbiased, that the data are plausible and free of manipulation, and that conclusions based on the data are justified. Discussions of the data should be balanced and should include competing ideas and products. In scientific reports, conflicts of interest present a risk, small though it may be, of bias and imbalance.

Journals require that all authors disclose secondary interests, such as financial and nonfinancial relationships with industry, that could potentially influence a report of an investigation. Such disclosures facilitate identification of possible bias. In the past, the *Journal* has required that authors complete a disclosure form and then has listed any conflicts of interest that the *Journal* determines to be relevant on the title page of each paper in abbreviated form. This listing is intended to permit readers to make their own judgments decisions about the reliability of the information in the report.

ENSURE BALANCED PRESENTATIONS

A most important function of the *Journal* is to ensure that it publishes only accurate, unbiased, and balanced papers that embody the highest scientific standards. The presence and extent of conflicts of interest may have little independent significance; they are useful to focus attention

on the possibility of bias and imbalance. The *Journal* selects manuscript reviewers on the basis of their expertise in the field, and, as experts, they are best positioned to evaluate the various qualities of the paper. Readers of the *Journal* are experts in the broad field of cardiothoracic surgery but generally are not expert in the specific area of the papers they read; therefore, the burden of ensuring scientific accuracy in the reports published in the *Journal* rests mainly on the reviewers and editors of the *Journal* and only secondarily on readers. To facilitate this process and to ensure the highest quality papers without bias, we modified the processing of manuscripts from submission to publication.

Authors are asked to treat every aspect of their investigations, including the reports they write, with complete honesty and integrity. To obtain the required information, they will be asked to complete a form created by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, which is widely used by biomedical journals. The completed forms collect detailed information about financial and nonfinancial conflicts of interest to provide the expert reviewers with the information required to focus their attention on areas of potential bias and imbalance in addition to their review of the information provided in the submission. The reviewers and editors have primary responsibility for ensuring balance and freedom from bias, to the greatest extent possible. The review process generally attempts to improve clarity and accuracy of reports by recommending changes to the authors. Authors are expected to consider the recommendations of the editors and reviewers and to respond to these concerns and revise their papers appropriately. This same process will also be used for the review of conflicts of interest are present and authors will be asked to respond to requests for more information or modifications of the manuscript until the papers are found to be either acceptable for publication or rejected.

SUMMARY

The more extensive conflict of interest information will permit reviewers and editors to ensure the accuracy, balance, and lack of bias of papers accepted for publication. Therefore, a brief conflict statement will be published on the cover page and a more extensive description will be published at the end of the paper to allow concerned readers to make their own judgments about the quality of the information reported.