

Authors and declarations of interest

Conflict of interest (COI) is an issue of grave importance for biomedical journals. We have, on occasion, picked up undisclosed COIs in articles submitted for publication. This has occurred during the review process, or after publication, when authors notify us of erroneous incomplete COI statements, or as a result of whistleblower reports. In all situations, an investigation is conducted for an informed assessment to be arrived at by the journal when managing the COI report. While COIs exist at various levels of the publication pipeline, this mini-editorial discusses some of the pertinent issues that authors should be aware of to enable them to apply themselves to the COI statement when submitting manuscripts for consideration for publication.

COI has increasingly been the focus of public attention over the past decades. With regard to COI in medicine, there has been substantial attention to and significant evolution of a range of aspects in this field. In the context of research, this may in part be due to several factors: the huge amounts of vital resources that industry provides to support clinical investigation, especially in light of the recent funding cuts being experienced globally; the progressively complex interface between academic medical centres, faculty and industry; the growing recognition of potential COIs at the individual physician level; and the commercialisation of medicine, encompassing start-ups, medical devices and applications, patents, ownership stakes and other intellectual property considerations. Accordingly, journals have a responsibility to respond to this changing environment.^[1]

Authors involved in research may have COIs, which can lead to bias, invalid results, or distortion in the interpretation of results to make them appear more favourable (spin).^[2] The impact of such undisclosed COIs would be, *inter alia*, a deviation in the truth of results, misleading conclusions and reduced public trust in research. A COI exists when professional judgement over a primary interest, for instance, patients' welfare or the validity of research, is influenced by secondary interests, such as financial gain, academic rivalry, career advancement or personal, legal or even professional relationships with other organisations, or with the people working with them, that could influence research interpretation or authors' opinions about the subject matter of an article.^[3,4]

Board membership, consultancy, employment, expert testimony grants (including pending), contract research, lectures/other education events, paid speaking arrangements, patents (planned, pending, or issued), receipt of equipment or supplies, royalties and stock/stock options/other forms of ownership are some examples of competing interests that may influence or appear to influence to research and/or write-up.^[5]

As can be seen, multiple aspects of medicine, including education, research and clinical care, are affected by COIs. To ensure the integrity and credibility of published articles and to promote public confidence and trust in the scientific process, effective evaluation and transparent management of COI are essential.^[1] The COI,

which could be actual, perceived or potential, does not preclude publication of an article, as there is nothing inherently unethical about having a competing interest, and articles are not rejected merely because of this. However, COIs should be acknowledged and openly stated. Hence, when submitting an article to the journal, full disclosure is necessary, as readers need to have all the information they require to enable them to formulate a reasonable opinion about a publication's message and conclusions. Therefore, all authors of all manuscripts offered for publication consideration to the *SAMJ* and its special issues (including research reports, postgraduate outputs, reviews, commentaries, opinion articles and letters to the editor) must provide detailed information about all relevant financial interests, activities, relationships and affiliations. In addition, authors publishing their postgraduate outputs should declare that the manuscript emanates from their study programmes. At times, the journal is made aware of this by reviewers who have examined the work.

Understanding, addressing and continually improving what is known about COI are essential if society is to retain the trust that is placed in research. At the *SAMJ*,^[6] we require that authors declare all sources of support for their research, any personal or financial relationships (including honoraria, speaking fees, gifts received, etc.) with relevant individuals or organisations connected to the topic of the article, and any association with a product or subject that may constitute a real, perceived or potential COI. If you are unsure whether a specific relationship constitutes a conflict, please contact the editorial team for advice. If a conflict remains undisclosed and is later brought to the attention of the editorial team, it will be considered a serious issue prompting an investigation, with the possibility of retraction.

AI contribution. Artificial intelligence (AI) was used to assist with language refinement.

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