

A matter of trust

Recent instances of potential conflicts of interest involving authors and journal editors may tarnish public confidence in the integrity of science journals.

“For Science’s Gatekeepers, a Credibility Gap.” “Tough-Talking Journal Editor Faces Accusations of Leniency.” “Some Seek to Lift Veil on Research Funding.” If such titles of recent newspaper clippings are any indication, public perception of the scientific publishing industry, perhaps still somewhat tender from bruises inflicted earlier this year by stories of fabricated data in a few high-profile articles, has taken another beating.

Some mainstream media have focused on the post-publication revelation of undeclared financial ties between pharmaceutical companies and authors of articles that appeared in recent issues of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Similarly, another group of authors who advocated the use of a new and controversial method for treating depression failed to disclose that they are paid consultants of a company currently marketing a device used to administer this treatment. Perhaps even more surprising was the fact that the lead author, Charles B. Nemeroff, was also the editor-in-chief of *Neuropsychopharmacology*, the journal in which the article was published. Nemeroff has since resigned.

In light of these and other incidents, some journals, including *JAMA*, have revised their policies on competing financial interests (CFIs). Beginning in 2007 *JAMA* will require disclosure of CFIs at the time of manuscript submission, rather than at the time of manuscript acceptance. Academic institutions are also taking measures to ensure that relevant faculty members understand the importance of appropriate declarations of CFIs. Even one granting agency, the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, which will soon begin distributing \$3 billion for stem cell research, is considering a move to make publicly accessible the CFI statements signed by reviewers of grant applications.

The editors at *Nature Immunology* realize that determining whether something constitutes a CFI is not always clear-cut. Therefore, we thought the time was ripe to review our current policy (<http://www.nature.com/nature/authors/policy/competing.html>) and discuss a few of the ‘gray areas’.

At the time of manuscript acceptance, *Nature Immunology* requires corresponding authors of primary research manuscripts, Reviews and Perspectives to select one of three CFI statements to accompany publication of their paper. Corresponding authors may choose to declare that they (or one or more of the contributing authors) do have CFIs, the specifics of which may be disclosed on the journal website; that they do not have CFIs; or that they decline to discuss CFIs. An affirmative declaration of CFIs should not be a sign of caution, raise questions about author objectivity or undermine the conclusions of the paper. Rather, publication of such a statement reflects an effort to maintain the highest degree of transparency and to ensure that responsibility for determining the importance of any potential CFIs is left with the reader, rather than only with the authors or the editors. That said, the choice of which CFI statement applies in a given situation is not always obvious.

As one example, authors sometimes accept money from companies that might profit as a result of publication, be it in the form of consulting or speaking fees or even direct research funding. Would that constitute a relevant CFI? After exposure of his compensation from pharmaceutical companies, Lee S. Cohen, the corresponding author of one of the above-mentioned *JAMA* articles, stated that he did not declare a CFI because this compensation ‘didn’t seem relevant’ and was not ‘megabucks’. Although *Nature Immunology* does not set thresholds above which financial compensation must be declared as a CFI, our policy includes a ‘rule of thumb’ to guide conflicted authors: ‘declare any financial interests that could embarrass you were they to become publicly known after your work was published.’

Nature Immunology often publishes manuscripts on which some or all authors are employed by biotechnology or pharmaceutical companies. In some situations, although the data may not have been generated by research directly related to a marketable product, the research might one day be used for development of a marketable product at the same company, making the possibility of future profit resulting from publication of this data difficult to exclude. *Nature Immunology* therefore asks authors employed by for-profit companies to declare that they do have CFIs.

Nature Immunology hopes that the authors of articles appearing in our pages receive publicity for their data, not for their failure to disclose receipt of funds from for-profit companies. On the same note, we hope that readers spend time contemplating ways in which data presented in our journal can be used to design new experiments or to interpret some of their own findings, rather than authors’ intentions or motives. Authors trust their peers to understand and interpret the intellectual and technical aspects of their data. Such trust could be extended to the realm of potential conflicts of interest: the same peers can be trusted to objectively evaluate the significance of any declared CFIs.

Finally, we want to inform our authors, referees and readers that measures aimed at preventing situations in which *Nature Immunology* editors might themselves become entangled in conflicts of interest are in place. First, *Nature Immunology* prohibits editors from receiving monetary compensation for work related to papers published in our journal. For example, editors cannot accept freelance assignments that entail writing about articles appearing in *Nature Immunology*. Second, the journal enforces a policy prohibiting editors from reaping financial profits from personal investments made on the basis of ‘inside information’, such as data contained within confidential submitted manuscripts. Finally, *Nature Immunology* is staffed by full-time professional editors, none of whom are currently actively engaged in scientific research.

Bottom line? *Nature Immunology* urges authors to err on the side of disclosure, so that decisions regarding the importance of authors’ financial interests are ultimately made by you, the reader.