

Taking more interest in conflict

Biomedical research and its commercial development often go hand-in-hand, creating the opportunity for the latter to unduly influence the former. A few recent cases of claim and counter-claim, including a particularly unpleasant and public case revolving around the charge that financial considerations may have influenced some immediately medically relevant research, provide an opportunity for the scientific community to reconsider the most appropriate way of avoiding such conflicts. Complete transparency of interests and an agreed policy of disclosure has a lot to recommend it.

Science, and biomedical science in particular, is competitive, and for many is a pursuit that generates considerable passion and emotion. No wonder, then, that competing scientists working in the most competitive disciplines occasionally come to blows. Research into HIV and Alzheimer disease seems to suffer more than most in this respect. Judging by recent events, this reputation seems justified, at least for the Alzheimer field (See *News*, page 717).

Repeating the charges and details of these cases here would only serve to highlight a small number of individuals who are in fact only a subset of a much larger community of biomedical researchers balancing the often conflicting demands of academia and commerce. The absence of widely agreed guidelines concerning how researchers should address any financial interests surrounding their work does not make their task any easier.

And here *Nature Medicine* (and the other *Nature* titles) has a case to answer. So far our policy has been to not require authors to disclose any commercial or financial interests that may be seen as

posing a conflict of interest with respect to the objectivity or impartiality of their scientific conclusions and recommendations. It has been our position that the research community should take responsibility for managing its own affairs when it comes to integrity and ethical behavior, whether it concerns commercial interests, authorship disputes or indeed wholesale misconduct. This policy is in keeping with the idea that independent journals such as *Nature Medicine* (and in distinction to society-based journals) have no mandate to police the scientific community's behavior. (Nor do we have the quite considerable resources this would require.) For the same reason, we do not require authors of submitted manuscripts to confirm that their results are genuine, honestly obtained and fair-minded with respect to the generally accepted ethical norms of the respectable research community. Instead, we trust authors to be honorable.

Others would go further, claiming that the links between academic and commercial pursuits are so intimate that it is naive to think that commercial interests do not play a part in today's science. Furthermore, no disclosure policy will prevent determined authors (be they unduly driven or downright dishonest) from seeking to influence readers inappropriately if they choose to. As such, the vigilant reader of the research article should expect no more than an accurate account of the experimental procedures and the specific results recorded. Beyond that purely factual account, all conclusions, opinions and recommendations are prone to many biases and interests, including financial, and the reader should draw his or her own conclusions directly, and

should treat those of others as at best a point of interest, and at worst a pitfall to be avoided.

Nature Medicine is unwilling, however, to accept this pessimistic state of affairs. To do so is to adopt as a default the expectation that all conclusions and recommendations surrounding a research paper are suspect and should therefore be avoided. Presumably the same would apply to all editorials and review articles. This would be a sorry situation. Instead, we cling to the idea that many (and perhaps most) biomedical researchers see their work as more of a vocation and less a means to a 'fast buck'. The twin aims of improving health and making money are not incompatible, but the wise biomedical researcher who has a commercial interest in his or her work appreciates that in the long term, the best way to make money from biomedical research is to generate impeccable science from which solid, informative and wise conclusions are drawn, in the expectation that only this caliber of knowledge will yield the safest and most effective products for diagnosing, prognosing, treating and curing disease—market forces will then take care of the rest.

If this is true, then it may be helpful if all authors were to disclose any potential financial conflicts of interest and for the journal to publish such disclosures, as to do so will reassure their readers that they have nothing to hide. Although an increasing number of journals are adopting such a policy, its value remains an open question. The *Nature* family of journals is reviewing its policy on disclosure of financial interests and welcomes your thoughts on the issue. Please email them to medicine@nature.com.