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## Disclosing competing financial interests

Beginning 1 October, 2001, *Nature Structural Biology* will join *Nature* and the other *Nature* research journals in adopting a policy regarding author disclosure of competing financial interests. For manuscripts received on or after 1 October, 2001, we will ask the authors to fill out a form declaring any such interests shortly before final acceptance of the paper. On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author may complete the form by stating that there are competing financial interests (for details, see ref. 1) or that there is no competing interest. This declaration (or a shortened version of it) will be published along with the paper. Alternatively, the authors may decline to provide such information. This will not prejudice publication, but we will inform the readers of the fact that the authors have declined to respond.

We are adopting this policy in response to the increasing public concern that commercial interests could potentially influence the conclusions of scientific research. Recent surveys on biomedical and clinical studies suggest that such a concern is not entirely unfounded. For example, a report published in 1999 in the *Journal of American Medical Association*<sup>2</sup> found that cancer treatment studies funded by the pharmaceutical industry were eight times less likely to report unfavorable conclusions regarding the cost-effectiveness of the treatments than studies sponsored by nonprofit organizations. Such findings suggest that commercial interests could potentially bias scientists in selecting evidence or interpreting results.

While the possible effects of commercial influences are primarily documented in the clinical literature, similar data on basic research are not available. This is not to say that there is no need for concern. In fact, financial interests stemming from basic research including structural biology are becoming more and more common. For example, high resolution structures can be used to validate drug target/lead selection; they can also be used for drug discovery and lead optimization<sup>3</sup>. Thus, structures can potentially shorten the time required to bring a drug to mar-

ket. For this reason, applying for patent protection for structures<sup>4</sup> is an option considered by many researchers and institutions. Alternatively, for-profit structure databases with added information on biological functions and/or biochemical mechanisms represent a viable business model for private companies participating in the structural genomics initiative<sup>5</sup>.

Some may argue that structures are physical entities and are unlikely to be biased by commercial interests. However, building structural models from experimental data and subsequent analyses are not completely straightforward<sup>5</sup>, leaving room for human interpretation and, thus, possible bias. These considerations indicate that structural biology research is not immune to the concern of competing financial interests. Fortunately, as far as we are aware, there is no evidence to suggest that the papers published in *Nature Structural Biology* have been tarnished by such bias.

Nevertheless, given the potential influence of commercial interests, we believe that the authors of a research paper should report, along with experimental results, any competing financial interests. Therefore, we will ask the authors to provide a declaration of such interests shortly before final acceptance of the paper. It will not be transmitted to the referees, nor will it affect the decision concerning publication.

A declaration of competing financial interests is not an admission of bias; rather, we believe that it provides transparency. With this piece of information, the readers — rather than the editors or referees — can form an independent and informed judgement about the significance of the research. We welcome comments and suggestions regarding this policy, which can be emailed to the editors ([nsb@natureny.com](mailto:nsb@natureny.com)).

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