

Anything to declare?



Declaring competing interests is crucial for transparency and for the integrity of cancer research, publishing and healthcare. Critically evaluating where bias may lie is essential too.



Competing interests, financial and non-financial, have the potential to influence the integrity of research and publishing and, ultimately, to hamper healthcare provision and shake public trust in science. Perhaps the most infamous example of the destructive potential of undisclosed financial conflicts is the impact on the opioid epidemic of the Sackler family and Purdue Pharma¹, their opioid-manufacturing company, through, among other means, ties with doctors, hospitals and universities, but also interactions with organizations such as the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine² and the World Health Organization^{3,4}. For the oncology community, the late Jose Baselga's fall from grace because of neglecting to disclose financial interests in a number of publications⁵ is an example closer to home that also highlights the personal and institutional repercussions such omissions can have.

In more general terms, financial interests may cloud objectivity in cancer research and influence the preclinical development of diagnostics and therapies and their translation to the clinic. However, considering all financial interests as detrimental does not appreciate the benefits of industry involvement through sponsorship and public-private partnerships for scientific breakthroughs, translational development and speedy innovation. The collaborative efforts between industry, governments and non-profit organizations to address the COVID-19 pandemic through basic research, testing and vaccine and therapy development is a prominent example of how such interactions can be beneficial. Clearly the key is in introducing and maintaining strong safeguards against potential conflicting interests and detrimental biases.

To that end, the Nature Portfolio journals and *Nature Cancer* have a [competing interests policy](#) in place that applies to authors, referees and editors and covers any financial and non-financial

interests that could affect the integrity and objectivity of the editorial and publishing process. Financial competing interests may relate to, among other things, research funding and sponsorship, and personal financial interests, including consulting or advisory fees, company stocks and shares, involvement in patents, and speaker or travel remuneration from organizations with vested interests. Non-financial interests are equally important, but defining them is less straightforward, as they could include social interactions and personal relationships, beliefs and conscious or unconscious biases, institutional loyalty, unpaid contributions to government, advocacy, educational or commercial organizations, and personal ambitions.

To comply with this policy, authors are required to disclose any competing financial and non-financial interests in relation to their submitted work, with the corresponding author being responsible for providing a competing interests statement on behalf of all co-authors. This statement is made available to referees during the peer-review process with the exception of double-anonymized peer review, during which, for the protection of author anonymity, only a minimal statement is provided that discloses the presence or absence of competing interests. Regardless of the peer-review model, the full competing interests statement is revealed to referees when the manuscript is accepted for publication and is included in the published paper. Authors are also required to disclose their funding sources in the acknowledgements section. It should be noted that the responsibility for full and appropriate disclosure lies firmly with the authors – the journal and its staff are not tasked with identifying or checking the authors' potential competing interests. However, if cases of undisclosed interests

come to our attention, we would evaluate the matter further and take action depending on the degree to which the undisclosed competing interest may affect confidence in the study.

In the case of referees, a key editorial responsibility is to identify appropriate experts while avoiding those with apparent financial and other conflicts. When referees are invited, they are provided minimal information on the submission (the abstract plus author names and affiliations, with the exception of double-anonymized peer review, in which case only the abstract is available) and are asked to recuse themselves if they deem that they have substantial competing interests that would affect their ability to provide an objective and fair review. In cases of uncertainty, we encourage referees to disclose potential conflicting interests to the editor so that a determination can be made of whether these are relevant and important enough to exclude that researcher from the peer-review process.

Our competing interests policy also applies to the journal editorial staff, who must disclose to their employer any financial or other interests that might affect their ability to fulfill their editorial role in compliance with the Nature Portfolio's practices and [pledge to authors](#).

The spirit of our competing interests policy is to foster transparency and aid readers in making their own determinations as to what may constitute a conflict or introduce bias. In navigating competing interests, honest and transparent self-reporting is key, as is critical scrutiny and evaluation of the conflicts disclosed by others. To that end, it is important to weigh the substance of what competing interests may represent and where bias may lie, so that we may uphold the integrity of science while reaping the benefits of broad collaborative efforts across academia and the industry.

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